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WEST

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UNDER THE SETTING SUN

EARLIEST AMERICAN TRAVELLERS TO SANTA FE

THE first known American to cross over land to Santa Fe, N.M., from the east, was James Pursley (Purcell?), who made the trip by way of the Platte and its South Fork in 1802. He was hunting with friendly Indians, and he and his party were driven from the prairies by the Sioux, seeking refuge in the mountains along the South Fork. From there he went to Santa Fe, where he remained for nineteen years, working as a carpenter.

The next on record is a French-Creole named La Lande, employed by a merchant at Kaskaskia, Ill. In 1804, his employer sent him with some trade goods up the Platte to go to Santa Fe and dispose of the goods. This he did, but kept the proceeds and remained there, where Zebulon Pike found him. He evaded restitution by pleading poverty, and was not further molested. In 1806 Pike was sent up the Arkansas River to locate the sources of Red River, then mistaken for the Canadian. He kept too far north, passed the feeders of the Canadian, crossed a range of mountains and found himself on the banks of the Rio Grande. Believing himself on the headwaters of Red River, and still in United States territory, he built a small fort to shelter himself and his fifteen men through the approaching winter. To the surprise of himself and his men he was visited by a party of Mexican troops, lied to and tricked, and taken prisoner to Santa Fe. From here the party was sent to Chihuahua, Mexico. Pike's fort was in the San Luis valley in Colorado, and only a few miles north of the present New Mexico line.

Next came Beard Chambers and McKnight's trading expedition from the Missouri settlements. They suffered great hardships on the way, were made prisoners and their goods confiscated upon reaching Santa Fe, several years passing before they were released from a Chihuahua prison. The prairies had now been conquered and the route learned. Hostility against Americans and their trading gradually died. Now came the first trading expedition which found a welcome in the Mexican settlements. A trader named Glenn led a party up the Arkansas River and reached Santa Fe before the end of 1821, and in the same year, Capt. Becknell and four men crossed the prairies from Missouri to trade with the Comanches. Learning from some Mexican rangers that Santa Fe was hungry for their small stock of merchandise, they joined the rangers, went to Santa Fe with them and made great profits. This was the beginning of the great and picturesque Santa Fe Trail.—C.E.M.

AN ADVENTURE OF HUGH GLASS

HUGH GLASS, a hunter for Andrew Henry's party of traders and trappers, had an escape from death which bordered on the miraculous. Hunting ahead of the party, Glass came upon a female grizzly lying on the ground. Before he could even set his triggers, she was upon him, got him by the throat, threw him down and tore off a mouthful of his flesh, which she straightway gave to her cubs. As Glass tried to get away she pounced upon him and inflicted terrible injuries which the entire party believed would be fatal. Glass was mangled and broken until he was unable to stand, and he suffered unspeakable tortures. Two men were paid to stay with him until he died; but, letting the rest of the party get a five days' start, and believing Glass could not recover, they basely took everything he had, and deserted him. Rejoin-

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ing the party, they reported that he had died. Glass did not die. Unarmed, and on the brink of death, his case seemed hopeless, but he dragged himself to a spring and got back a little of his strength by living on berries. When able to crawl longer distances, he set out for a post (Ft. Kiowa), a hundred miles away, dragging himself doggedly forward, spurred on by the desire for vengeance. Finding a buffalo calf being attacked by wolves, he waited until the calf was killed, then frightened away the wolves and ate what he could of the raw meat. Resting, he started out again, carrying what meat he could, and finally reached the post.

When his strength had returned he set out in pursuit of the two men who had robbed and deserted him. His quest took him to the mouth of the Big Horn, where he found the younger man, whom he excused because of his youth. This youth, it has been said, was James Bridger. The other, Fitzgerald, had left for Ft. Atkinson, on the Missouri River just above the mouth ofthe Platte. Glass set out after him, going to and down the valley of the Platte. In his pursuit he escaped death several times by a hair's breadth, was robbed by the Indians of everything he had except a knife and a shot punch, which forced him to return to Ft. Kiowa. After a short wait he went down the Missouri, but when he reached Ft. Atkinson he learned that Fitzgerald had enlisted in the army, and Glass then gave up the idea of revenge.—C.E.M.

CACHES

THE term, from the French *cacher* (to hide), was applied by French-Canadian trappers to the cache, its contents, or to the act of caching. Occasionally it became necessary for them to hide furs and supplies in the mountains, woods, or on the plains, and they went about it in an ingenious manner. First a place was selected high enough to give assurance that water would not stand over it, and then, with skins or blankets spread to receive the dirt from the hole, and so it could be carried away and scattered or submerged, they went to work. If grass covered the spot, operations were begun by removing sod enough to open the entrance. The hole was usually jug-shaped, and when deep enough and large enough to hold the goods, it was lined with dry grass, sticks and old skin robes to interpose between the contents and the earth. Having made the goods into compact bundles, well wrapped in hides, and stowed them in the cache, it was then filled up, the earth carefully packed and tramped, and the sod replaced. In carrying away the excess dirt care was taken not to make a track on the trips back and forth. If no grass grew over the cache, the filled hole was covered with the characteristic surface soil and a fire built over it, or animals driven about on it, to further disguise the opening. Sometimes caches were made in the sides of hills or the banks of streams, but in the latter case there was always danger of a freshet ruining the goods. Rival trappers and trading companies have been known to rifle caches that did not belong to them, and the Indians, who were quick to discover them if the work had not been well done, always considered them to be fair game. One of the give-aways was the sinking of the earth from rains, which left significantly regular hollows.—C.E.M.

SUN-RAYS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

THE beneficial effects of sunlight in the treatment of many diseases is well recognised, but persons who imagine that they are being benefited in health by sitting in a "sun-parlour" behind closed or even partly opened windows must guess again, say scientists who have been calculating the effect of sun-rays on the human organism. The light rays that reduce inflammations, build up healthy tissue in tuberculous joints and otherwise accelerate nature's restorative processes, are the ultra-violet or short rays that do not pass through glass. They will penetrate quartz, however, and it has been found that the electric light, either the carbon arc or the mercury-vapour arc, if enclosed in a quartz tube, gives off rays that have healing powers equal to those of the sun.

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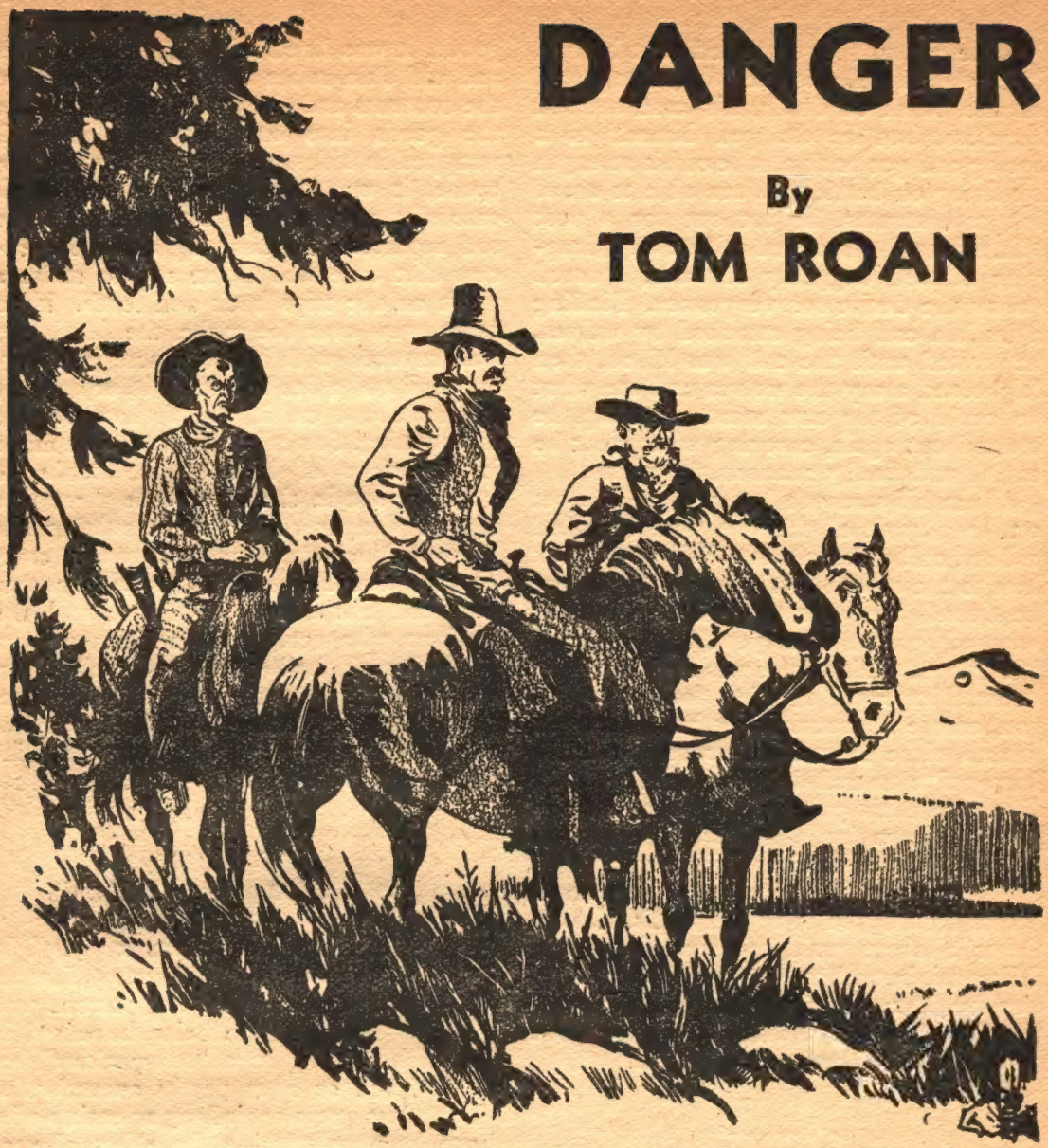
DANGER

By
TOM ROAN



Buzzards circling in the lowering sunlight five miles south of Lone Deer led The Powder River Kid off the trail to investigate. He swung old Monte, his long-legged black, to the right, winding out through the rimrocked knolls until he came to the foot of a flat-topped ridge. It was then that he heard a horse neighing pleadingly in the pines ahead.

Old Monte answered the horse, and The Kid rode on, mounting the sharp slope. As he reached the upper rim of it he saw a big, flea-bitten gray tied with a grass rope around his neck to the bole of a stout little pine.

Twenty feet beyond the horse, a big, dark-bearded man lay flat on the ground with his arms stretched straight out from his sides and lashed, like his ankles, to stout pegs driven in the ground. His throat had been horribly cut from ear to ear, a deep, slashing gash. Black eyes, wide open, stared unseeingly at the careening black shapes mounting higher in the air with The Kid's approach.

The Kid whistled as he eased out of Monte's saddle. His first impulse was to go forward and kick those stakes loose from the ground. But a thought warned him that this was a job only for the sher-

RIVER

Pop Warner Was A Good Brake For The Powder Kid's Hell Raisin'. But When The Two Of Them Tangled With The Double-Crossers Of The Diamond Bar Diamond There Was Trouble Aplenty

Through the trees three horsemen had approached . . . The Powder River Kid knew he was in for trouble . . .

iff of Lone Deer. It was all right to find a dead man, but to touch or disturb the body was something that might bring trouble down on a fellow's head.

And this thing here was murder, as cold-blooded and brutal as any man had ever witnessed. The only sensible thing to do about it was to leave everything undisturbed, buzzards or no buzzards, and to burn wind for the sheriff's office.

That meant the horse standing there tied to the pine, too. The Kid saw that the animal had been there for many hours and was suffering from thirst. Less than half

a mile away flowed the big, winding stream of Danger River.

He turned to the horse, forgetting everything for the moment but the animal's distress, and then stopped short, looking at a single sheet of paper tied in the gray's dark mane. On the paper, written in a big, scrawling hand, were five words that read:

He didn't take the hint.

The Kid folded the paper carefully and placed it in the pocket of his brown calfskin vest. Doggedly determined that the gray should suffer no longer, he slipped the big saddle from the animal's back and removed the bridle and rope. He slapped the horse on the rump. With a grateful nicker, the gray turned abruptly to head straight for the river.

"I hope you don't drink enough to founder yourself," commented The Kid. "If it gets me in trouble, it's just too bad."

He fired three shots at the buzzards from the long old Colt at his hip. Two of them dropped, the others wheeling rapidly away toward long lines of cliffs in the distance.

He was swinging back into the now nervous Monte's big saddle when he heard the rapid, pistol-like clatter of hoofs coming toward him from the north. He glanced through the trees. Three horsemen were approaching.

The man in the lead, mounted on a high-strung chestnut-sorrel that carried the markings of a thoroughbred, was somewhere close to fifty, well over six feet tall, his hair as coarse and straight as a black mane, his cheekbones high, his nose long and curving. He was dressed in black from the tall crown of his big hat to his boots. Big six-shooters rode at his hips, ivory-butted and silver-mounted.

Just behind him, clattering along on an old pinto, was a little, pop-eyed man with an unreasonably long neck. Behind him, mounted on a tall bay, was a rolling-fat man with bushy red hair and beard. On the vests of each of the riders glittered a silver star, marking them as guardians of the law.

With a snort and lurch to one side, the taller man's horse threatened to go into a frenzy of pitching as it was directed toward the body on the ground. There were quick gasps of surprise, and the riders swung to one side and threw themselves out of their saddles. The little pop-eyed man held the three horses while the others came forward.

"Well, and now what!" The man in black glanced from the body to The Kid. "Another dead one!"

"You fellows look like what I was just going to ride for." The Kid was slipping out of his saddle again. "I saw the buzzards, rode up here, and this is what I found . . . all except the fellow's horse. I turned it loose so that it could go to the river."

"Right nice of yuh, I'll bet." The red-bearded man spoke, his voice thick, half-sullen. "We hearn the shootin'."

Something in the faces of these men told The Kid he was in for trouble, and he stood near Monte, waiting. Nearer thirty than twenty, there was yet a boyish look about him that had given him his name. He watched the taller man walk slowly around the body, and then to him, his dark face hard and grimly set. The man spoke, his voice quick, certain.

"Well, now what have you to say about this? I'm Mark Powell, sheriff of Lone Deer. This man is Walter Dunn, my chief deputy, and the other is Jack Loft, another deputy. You might as well start at the beginning."

"It won't take long," The Kid told him. "My real name's Peter Clark, born a few miles south of Miles City. Cowboy, bronc twister, as you can probably guess. I've ridden quite a bit here and there, the last time at the Calgary Stampede. Got in

the money, and picked up the name of The Powder River Kid because, I guess," a slow smile moved his lips, "I'm a little short on growing as heavy a beard as others my age."

He told them of where he had been, where he had spent each day and night for fully a week that lay behind him, and again of seeing the buzzards, of his find here on the ridge. Then he produced the note he had taken from the gray's mane. Powell and Dunn looked at it, and Powell refolded it and carefully placed it in his pocket.

"That, I reckon," wound up The Kid, "is about all I can tell you. I think it's plain enough, isn't it?"

"Perhaps." Powell turned, glanced at Dunn and Loft, and then back at the body of the dead man. "Where'd you say you were last night?"

"At a sheep camp in Windy Pass, south of here as you know, and a long day's ride away."

Powell turned, looking at old Monte closely. Dunn muttered something. Powell nodded, lips tightening. He turned, looking The Kid up and down quizzically.

"I think," he said slowly, "that your story, young fellow, would probably leak very badly if you tried to make it hold water. You can consider yourself under arrest."

"But . . . but what for?" The Kid took a step backward. "A fool can see that that man there has been dead for hours, maybe since last night. I couldn't have had anything to do . . ."

"Cut it, pardner!" Dunn had stepped forward, a big, black six-shooter gripped in his right hand. "Talk won't get yuh nowhere now. What Mark says goes, an' if yuh wanta know what I think, yo're a plain, ordinary damned liar in all yo've said. Put up yore hands!"

He jabbed the muzzle of the six-shooter forward, pressing it hard against the pit of The Kid's stomach. "Be quick about it! I ain't a man to stand an' fool."

Slowly, The Kid's hands lifted. A weak, disarming little smile moved the corners of his boyish mouth. Only the narrow, streak-like sparkle of his blue eyes gave it the lie.

Dunn chuckled. He even lowered his six-shooter as he reached for the old Colt hanging in its battered holster at The Kid's

right hip. But the chuckle died in his throat to give place to a sickening *smack!*

Dunn's six-shooter had been suddenly knocked aside. His feet seemed to tear themselves off the ground. A big, lumbering, ox-like thing, he went backward and down, his booted heels kicking the air for a moment before they came down with a crash that buried their long-shanked rowels in the ground.

The Kid had moved swiftly. Submitting so peacefully that even Powell had turned to one side, he had lashed down with his right fist that caught Dunn flat and hard on the side of the throat. His left hand had moved at the same instant. It had shot down, knocking the big gun out of the deputy's hand.

Cold, blue eyes were watching Dunn, Powell and Loft now over the barrel of the old Colt that had come into The Kid's right hand. Instinctively, Powell and Loft had lifted their hands. Dunn, too hurt and amazed to do anything else, followed their moves. The Kid spoke, voice low but as dangerous in tone as the warning sound of a rattlesnake.

"I heard down the way, folks, that

strangers more often got in jail up here than not. I'm not fond of jails, especially when the evidence is as thin as this. I'll be obliged if you'll get up, Dunn, and turn your back to me. I'll be obliged to Powell and the frog-eyed fellow if they'll do the same."

They cursed themselves for it when The Kid took their guns, quickly and quietly. Once in possession of their weapons, he stepped back to old Monte and hung them on his saddle.

"I'm sorter in the habit, folks," he told them with the little grin still on his face, "of playing the dumb fool when ducks like you come along. I had nothing to do with this dead man here. Anybody with one eye and at least one brain could see that, but you folks are like a lot of law tripe. You must arrest somebody. I'm not ready just yet to visit your jail, Powell. Do I take your horses and leave you afoot, or do you want to be sane and sober about it?"

"This is robbery." Mark Powell's face was bloodless with his rage now. "Plain, ordinary highway robbery!"

"It was murder a minute ago, mister," grinned The Kid. "But talk won't help you. I've got your hardware. I'm not fool enough to give it back to you, but if you're right nice about it, I'll leave your tools in the first saloon I come to in Lone Deer. Don't try to rush me, though. I'm mean about being rushed."

He added, as he saw Dunn glance cautiously toward the dead man, "I'll take that gun along with me, too. You fellows might get to fooling around with it and get hurt."

He took their horses a few minutes later, ignoring their curses and threats. "Walking's not crowded," he chided them, grinning. "About two miles up the trail you'll find the horses. That'll make it right sure that you won't crowd me. Maybe I'll leave your guns hanging on the saddles. I'm right accommodating at times."

"I'll see yuh stretch rope for this, damn yuh!" Dunn's voice was like the bellow of a dying calf. "Yuh can't get away with this thing. Yuh can't make suckers outa us an' think we won't get even. We're the law in these parts, an' as shore as Gawd made little apples we'll hook this murder job on yuh 'fore we're done with yuh!"

"Shut your damned mouth!" rasped Powell. "This is only temporary, fool. He won't have the chance of a snowball in hell from now on. He—he's playing good cards for us, if you've got sense enough to know what I mean."

He lowered his tone with the last sentence. The Kid was already leaving them, leading the three horses behind old Monte. He grinned back over his shoulder at them as he urged the horses into a long, easy gallop.

CHAPTER II

Colt-Backed Order

And so he was in trouble again. . . . In trouble to the eyes, if The Kid knew anything about it. It had a knack of catching up with him now and then, and for the past three or four years he had developed the half-wicked little habit of laughing at it when it came along. A smile or a laugh now and then cleared a man's head, and one could work out his destiny more easily with a clear head.

Two miles up the old trail along the river, he did just what he said he would do. He tied the reins of the three horses to the low limb of a cottonwood and hung the six-shooters on a saddle, the dead man's with them. He stood for a few moments admiring the sheriff's extra-fine weapons.

"Cost lots of money," he told himself, thinking of the worn old gun at his hip. "A hundred bucks apiece, counting all the fancy engraving. Maybe more. I should, I guess, get me a job and go in for a fancy star and a couple of hog-legs like these, but

I don't seem to run into these big-paying sheriff jobs."

There was something almost gay about him as he rode on. It never occurred to him to wonder about it. Coming up the trail before he had seen the buzzards, he had been somewhat glum, a little tired and indifferent with old Monte plodding along. He had even been a little sleepy, sitting hunched down there in his old saddle, paying little attention to anything except the winding old trail streaking along in front of him.

He rode lightly now, Montana cowboy fashion, standing tilted forward in his stirrups, not knowing what was ahead of him, not caring. His conscience was clear, and his reputation, with everything taken into consideration, was a good one, marred only by a little dabbling in other persons' troubles here and there . . . a little dabbling that had made him countless friends as well as a few unscrupulous enemies who would hate him and curse him to the day of his death—or theirs.

"I could sure like it here," he told himself, "and maybe like to hang up my saddle for a spell if it wasn't for the three law gents who'll soon come banging in on my tail."

Shaded by giant cottonwoods up and down its broad main street, the town stood on the high bank of the eastern side of Danger River. Most of the houses and buildings were of logs, their roofs tall and steep enough to remind one of the type of buildings in the deeper snow country far north of the Canadian Border. Board walks and hitch-racks lined the street. In the center of it stood a long water-trough of stone, and at the head of it, pretentiously imposing, stood a two-story building larger than any of the others in town.

"Court house and jail," grinned The Kid. "Jail on the ground floor, and a place for the lawyers to howl above it. And just to think, Monte ol' hoss, we were offered bed and board in that fine establishment . . . and may get it yet."

He would have a few minutes to spare, anyway. Time enough, perhaps, for a couple of drinks, about all that he ever troubled himself to take, and a bite to eat in one of the three restaurants along the street.

And while he was about it, keeping a strong eye peeled for the sheriff and his deputies, maybe he could get a line on lanky Pop Warner and find out what the old fellow was doing here and why he had written that letter to Circle City, asking him to leave a perfectly good job and come up here to join him. That much he had not told the sheriff and the deputies, and now he was glad that he had not.

Swinging to the left, he pulled up at the hitch-rack in front of The Jackpot. Next to the court house and jail, it was the largest building in town. But there were only six men standing at the long bar as he entered through the swinging doors. One of them was a thin-faced, consumptive-looking fellow with a star on his vest to mark him as the fourth lawman The Kid had seen that day.

The men turned and eyed him curiously. A big man, head as shiny as a rising moon, came forward from behind the bar. There was something about him that reminded The Kid of Walter Dunn, the deputy.

"Beer," ordered The Kid. "A long bottle of it . . . cold enough, if you've got it, to freeze a fellow's flues as it goes down."

"Yo'll take what yuh can get," answered the bartender, grumpily. "No bottled stuff here, but what's in the keg is good enough for others an' maybe good enough for yuh."

"My mistake," grinned The Kid. "Keg's good enough. Make it a schooner as long as your arm."

He was conscious of a low whispering as the bartender drew the beer. The man with the star said something in a guarded tone,

then laughed, picking up a large tin pail sitting on the bar in front of him.

"See yuh boys later," he grunted. "Ol' man Warner's beer'll be gettin' stale if I don't shuffle, an' that allus makes 'im mad as hell." He turned, looked The Kid up and down, and passed on out the door with a curt, decidedly unfriendly, "Howdy, stranger."

"Four bits!" requested the bartender a moment later, setting a large glass of beer in front of The Kid. "Drinks come high in Lone Deer, mister—er— What'd yuh say yore name was?"

"I didn't say." The Kid looked straight into his eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, I didn't ask you yours." He tossed a half dollar on the bar and quickly lifted his glass. "Here's to you."

"Cowboy, ain'tcha?" Again there was that quizzical stare in the bartender's reddish-brown eyes. "Judgin' from yore rig?"

"I've done a little bit of everything of late," lied The Kid. "Sheep's my line these days, and maybe that means you'll soon be telling me to get out and stay out."

"It don't." For an instant the bartender's face relaxed its scowl. "It's the other way 'round in Lone Deer these days, mister, since the sheepmen moved in an' the cowmen took a back seat. Who're yuh herdin' for?"

"Been with Spruce and Jeddy, down south of Cottonwood Creek," lied The Kid, realizing that here was a chance to get a little quick information, for something had told him at a glance that the five men in front of the bar were sheepmen. "With him since last summer. Looking for a herd now. Know of anybody?"

"Olin Maxwell might use yuh." The bartender turned to his cash register, and threw thirty-five cents on the bar with a grin. "My mistake, pardner." He chuckled. "I marked yuh as a puncher when yuh blowed in. But as I was sayin', Olin Maxwell might use yuh. He'll come driftin' in atter supper. Stick about an' make yoreself at home."

"Thanks." It was The Kid's turn to grin again. "I'm liking it here right off the reel. That duck that went out must be a deputy, and he must have had beer in that bucket. If there's any town I like, it's a town where they let a fellow have his dram in jail. You don't strike many of them."

"That was Trigg Porter, yeah," nodded the bartender. "Got a heap bigger heart in 'im than I've got. He's jail boss, yuh see. Got an old squirt up their called Pop Warner, an' I'm damned if Trigg don't run his legs off packin' 'im beer. I feel like spittin' in that damned bucket ever'time I draw it full of beer, but Warner's payin' for it an' Trigg gets his share of it. Won't be long, anyway, that Warner'll be buyin' anything. They've got a murder job cinched on 'im. Iron-clad. He ain't got a chance. He'll stretch rope 'fore he's done."

"Bad actor, huh?" The Kid chuckled.

"Was!" corrected the bartender. "He's right tame now. They all tame, mister, when Mark Powell screws down on 'em. Mark'll be wantin' to talk to yuh. Better talk straight up to 'im. He ain't a man what takes foolin'. He knows who comes an' who goes in an' outa Lone Deer these days."

"Which, I'd say," drawled The Kid, "is plumb right an' plenty proper. Where can I get a good bite to eat?"

"Up the street, last eatin' dump on the left. Good home cookin'. I eat there m'self."

"Thanks."

Time was getting short. In just a little while, that long-legged sheriff and his two deputies might come banging into town, but The Kid took his time. He bought drinks for the men at the bar, had another beer, and strolled out with the excuse of getting something to eat.

He rode up the street to the restaurant, and feeling that he might be watched, dismounted at the hitch-rack. He entered

the place. A tall, hatchet-faced woman of fifty-odd was behind the counter. The Kid handed her a dollar.

"Big plate of ham an' eggs an' coffee," he drawled. "I'll be back for it in ten minutes. Just gonna run up an' see Trigg for a minute or two."

Leaving his horse at the hitch-rack, he sauntered into the big, dingy office of the jail. Porter was just locking the iron-barred door to the long corridor of the jail. He turned, face quickly hardening as if he suspected something.

"You've got a man in here by the name of Pop Warner, I hear," The Kid told him, gently. "I dropped in to see him."

"Yeah?" Porter straightened. "Others do that too, but nobody sees Warner without a written order from the sheriff or unless the sheriff's right here. Who are yuh, anyhow? I saw yuh down in The Jackpot."

"I have an order that says for you to let me see Pop Warner."

"Yo've got an order?" Porter's eyes widened. "If yuh have, yo've got to show me, mister."

"This is it!" The big Colt had come out of The Kid's holster, its muzzle suddenly covering Porter. "It says to show one gent, one that looks exactly like me and might be me, right in to Pop Warner. If you have any doubts about the strength of this order, just stand there and try to argue, and just to convince you, I'll open air holes in your guts. *Open that damned door!*"

CHAPTER III

Jail Delivery

The color drained quickly out of Trigg Porter's long, hawkish face. His mouth opened, lips curling. He sucked in his breath sharply, expelling it with a sudden grunt. Slowly, hesitatingly, his lean hands lifted, fingers relaxing, the heavy jail keys clattering to the floor.

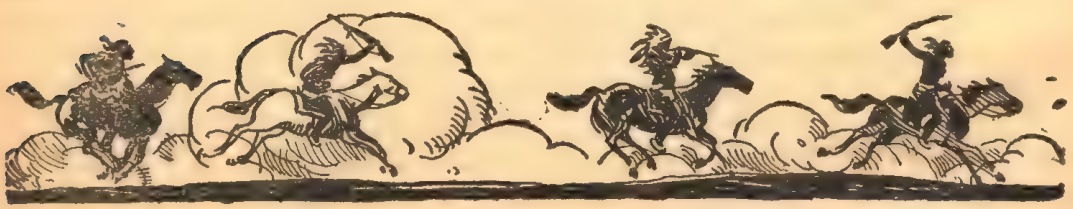
"Pick 'em up!" ordered The Kid. "I haven't got all day to stand and argue with you, Porter. I had"—a thin ugly little smile moved his lips—"to shoot the last jailer I met. His wife and children took it hard."

"Yuh . . . yuh can't do this!" Porter's voice was a gasp. "Yuh . . . yuh . . ."

The *click-clack*-ing made by the cocking hammer of The Kid's gun cut him short. He stooped, picking up the keys, his body shaking now as if with a sudden chill.

"Mark . . . Mark'll kill me for . . . for this," he chattered. "He . . . he ain't a man to . . . to stand for this."

"Well," grinned The Kid, "I'll come back and pin a rose on your bosom and plant a grapevine on your grave when he does. I'm right good to ducks like you who get killed over the little things I do now



and then for pastime. Shuffle along, grandpap. I'm getting the damndest cramp you ever heard of in this trigger finger of mine. It was a cramp that killed the last jailer."

"Who . . . who the hell are yuh, anyhow?" Porter's voice was like a shaking sob now. "Comin' . . . comin' here like . . . like this?"

"I'm Jubilee Bill," lied The Kid. "Maybe you've heard of me. I robbed the express office in Circle City about a week ago and had to shoot the agent because the son-of-a-gun acted plumb rude about opening the safe."

"Good Gawd!" groaned Porter, throwing open the door. "I . . . I've hearn of yuh. Go . . . go in." He stepped to one side. "I . . . I reckon the joint's yores."

"Lead kindly light." The Kid was still grinning. "Straight to where you've got Pop Warner. And don't fumble your keys. I'm right down-mulish about jailers doing things like that."

They were down the corridor and Porter was nervously fitting the key into the lock of a tall, white-bearded old man's cell. The door was finally thrown open. The old man picked up his hat. A toothless grin streaked his face.

"I kinda thought yuh would come," he chuckled.

"Take Trigg's gun," ordered The Kid. "And the keys with it. He goes into that cell for safe-keeping." He glanced to the right and left as Pop Warner quickly stripped Porter's gun belt. "Anybody else here who'd like to get out?"

"I'm the only star boarder," grinned Warner. "Been locked up here on a trumped up murder charge for . . ."

"That can wait, Pop!"

"Oh, shore!" Warner gave the jailer a push into the cage-like cell, and slammed the door.

"Yuh act scared plumb to death, Trigg, but that cell's mighty comfortin' at times," he said. "An' thanks for the beer, even if yuh allus did charge me a dollar a bucket for gettin' it . . . an' then standin' outside my cell an' drinkin' two-thirds of it."

"Yo'll swing for this!" Some of Porter's nerve was returning. "Mark'll hunt yuh down with a posse an' shoot yuh like a rat or hang yuh to the highest limb he can find!"

"Come on," snapped The Kid. "Don't argue with him. And listen, you! Get this straight!" He stepped close to the cell door. "If you start bellowing, I'll come back and shoot hell out of you through the window."

They hurried down the corridor and Pop Warner ran to the big, flat-topped desk in the corner. Out of a bottom drawer he took a pair of battered gun belts and two long six-shooters. He tossed Porter's weapon in an old trash-box and buckled on his own belts.

"My hoss is out back in the barn," he grumbled as he crossed the office to a rifle cabinet on the wall. "This means a fight, son, as soon as anybody finds out what's goin' on. Yuh better take yoreself one of these long-shootin' guns."

"Take a couple of 'em!" ordered The Kid. "Take plenty of shells. I don't know what it's all about, but I've got a hunch. But you take that truck and get out to your horse. I've got a little date down the street. It'll take only about three minutes."

"Wait a minute, now." Warner caught him by the arm. "Don't try no funny business, son. This town's hair-triggered an' double-cocked lightnin'."

"You do what I tell you." The Kid was already hitching up his belt and sauntering out the door. "I'll be back by the time you're ready. I've got a date with my belly."

He strolled down the street, leading his horse. Ham, eggs and coffee were waiting for him. He wolfed down the food, standing there at the long counter.

"You eat fast, don'tcha?" commented the hatchet-faced woman. "Like you're in a powerful hurry."

"Allus eat thataway," drawled The Kid. "I was born in a famine, yuh see, down on the Powder. Folks said the first thing I done was to gnaw the hind legs off the table."

"You're a cowboy, ain'tcha?"

"No ma'a-am," he bleated. "She-e-e-p's line. *Bah-h-ah.* Can't yuh te-e-ell it?"

"I think you're a liar." The woman's eyes had grown mean and narrow. "I can smell a cowboy a mile away these days."

"Yu-u-uh could!" mimicked on The Kid. "With that *ba-a-ah-ah* smeller of yores, keen-pointed as it is, yuh oughta be able to punch holes in a pine tree with it just like a woodpecker."

He turned to the door with the woman glowering bloody murder at him. He sauntered back to the hitch-rack, swinging himself into old Monte's saddle.

A glance to southward showed him that two men were coming, riding devil-bent on sweat-lathered horses. They were yet a mile away, but he recognized them. The man in the lead was Mark Powell, and just behind him, storming along in the dust, was the red-bearded figure of Walter Dunn.

"Left the little one, I reckon," grinned The Kid, "to bring in the fellow with his throat cut. Well, Monte ol' hoss, it begins to look like moving day for us. Sorry we haven't time to get you a belly-whopping feed of grain, but you'll run better light."

He rode on up the street, rounding the jail building. At the rear of it he found Pop Warner coming out of a corral on a big, hammer-headed roan.

"All set," grinned the old man. "Better take one of these long-shootin' guns, son."

"Sure," nodded The Kid. "Pass it over. And get ready to ride like hell whaling a drum."

Lone Deer was already stirring. Someone had seen the tall sheriff and his deputy. A little group was pouring from the doorway of The Jackpot, and from another saloon across the street. A paint-scabbed signboard above the latter's door announced THE HOG & WHISTLE — WHISKEY ON TAP AND REAL ICE ON OUR BEER. Somebody suddenly yelled, pointing to them both.

The Kid turned quickly in his saddle. The rifle he had taken from Pop Warner's hand jerked to his shoulder. He took quick aim, squeezed the trigger. At the sound of the rifle's splintering crash, a brown jug hanging on a hook above The Hog & Whistle shattered to bits.

"Now ride, cowboy," yelped The Kid, kissing his hand at the main street as he dropped low over his saddle horn, driving home his big rowels. "We haven't got nothin' but trouble on our mind!"

CHAPTER IV
The Bully

Mark Powell and Walter Dunn struck the street with the fury of a storm, their spent horses slinging sweat-lather in every direction. Excited

groups were already rushing from the old board walks in front of the saloons and throwing themselves into their saddles. Powell yelled at them as he shot by in the rising dust and dying sunlight.

"Follow me," he bawled, "follow me!"

He swung around the corner of the jail, and snatched his horse to a halt as the voice of Trigg Porter started an outlandish braying inside the jail. In the distance, riding like wind up Danger River, two fleeing horsemen were whipping themselves out of sight around a long, gradual bend in the stream.

"After them!" yelled Powell. "Our horses won't last another mile. Run them down. Shoot them like dogs!"

He had taken in everything at a glance. That tall roan darting out from behind the jail had told him that Pop Warner was making a getaway. With the riders from the saloons tearing on in boiling clouds of dust, he swung back to the old hitch-rack in front of the jail, threw himself out of his saddle with the fat Walter Dunn at his heels, and hurried inside the jail office.

"Shut up!" he bawled through the corridor door to the wailing Trigg Porter. "Where in hell's the keys to this damned dump?"

"I . . . I don't know!" Nervousness had turned Porter's voice into high-pitched chattering. "I reckon they musta took 'em along with 'em."

"Go to my house, quick!" ordered Powell, whirling to Dunn. "Get the extra set of keys out of the bottom drawer of that old desk in my bedroom."

It seemed that everybody in town who did not have a horse within reach had come hurrying to the jail. Men rushed in, faces flushed with excitement, everybody talking at once.

"A jail delivery, yes!" barked the sheriff to the many questions. "Warner taken out of here right under your damned noses. I'm going to stomp hell out of Trigg when I get to him."

"I didn't have a chance, Mark!" Porter's voice was another chattering wail coming down the corridor and through the barred door. "Good Gawd, man, it was . . . It was Jubilee Bill . . . Jubilee Bill Fanningway what come!"

"You fool, did you get taken in as slick as that?" roared Powell through the bars. "I know who it was. It was a slick-faced youngster—The Powder River Kid. Jubilee Bill Fanningway doesn't look anymore like that squirt than a crow does to a humming bird!"

"But . . . but he said he was Jubilee Bill."

"You wait until I get my hands on you, you damned old buzzard," the sheriff snarled.

"I . . . I couldn't he'p it, Mark." Porter's voice had changed to a blubbery moan now. "I . . . I swear I couldn't, Mark. My Gawd, man, I wasn't 'spectin' a thing. I didn't have a chance. I swear I didn't, Mark."

"He's about right in that, Mark." Sunny Jim Sweet, the big, moon-faced bartender from The Jackpot, had come into the jail office. "The duck what done this played us all for suckers . . . an' won. He's an innocent lookin' duck, right smooth in his talk. Hell, I even sent 'im to Hatchet Maude's for somethin' to eat."

"A nice clown, you are," sneered Powell, eyes blazing with his wrath. "It's a wonder you wouldn't have paid Maude for his grub . . . and maybe you did at that!"

"I didn't." The big bartender's face reddened as he glanced at the floor. "But I'll bet if Olin Maxwell had come along, sharp as he is, he would have tried to hire that duck for a sheepherder. Yes, sir, Mark, he was smooth. Oily. So damned quietish, an' . . . an' yet," he glanced up at the ceiling, "somethin' sorter told me, at that, that I didn't like the cut of his eyes an' the kinda bob-cat curl that come to his lips once or twice while he was drinkin' there at the bar. He softened us all down.

Even bought drinks for all of the boys."

"Oh, to hell with that," rasped the sheriff, turning away. "Here's Walt with the damned keys."

"Yore wife found 'em for me," exclaimed the big deputy. "I reckon we're plumb lucky we had an extra set or we'd have to blast these doors down."

A few moments later, shaking and cringing, Trigg Powell was dragged from his cell.

"I couldn't he'p it, Mark," he moaned. "I swear I couldn't. Gawd A'mighty knows that duck had slicked his gun on me 'fore I could bat my eye. I wasn't thinkin' . . . Oh, Mark!"

Mark Powell had knocked him down with a quick, straight blow that smashed into the old man's face like a hammer.

"Wait, Mark!" Sunny Jim Sweet had caught the sheriff by the arm.

Powell jerked himself free. Without a word, his fist shot like a mallet to the big bartender's chin. Like a sprawling ox, Sweet went down flat on his back, heels flying. Powell spoke, his voice a sharp, metallic rasp:

"Anybody else here who'd like to tell me how to run my business?"

No one answered him. Even the reddish-eyed Walter Dunn stepped back against the wall and seemed to be holding his breath. They dropped their gaze to the floor. Trigg Powell and Sunny Jim Sweet stumbled to their feet, the older man covering his bleeding mouth with his cupped hands as he eased to the corner behind the big desk. Sweet stood up, brushing his clothes. He turned then, face ghost-white, and pushed his way through the crowd to the door.

"If you think," the sheriff called after him, "that you're going after a gun, you can have one of mine . . ."

"Yuh had no call for this!" Sweet snarled the words over his shoulder. "Yuh had no call for it."

"Better watch 'im, Mark." A burly, black-bearded sheepman had stepped up close to Powell, speaking in a half-guarded voice. "He's killed two men in this town."

"Are you trying to give me advice?" Powell turned upon him suddenly, his face bear-like now in its scowl. "If you are, Sid Turner, I'll tell you here and now to go to hell with it!"

"I'm yore friend, Mark." The big sheepman shook back his shoulders, a wicked glint coming into his eyes. "Been that way since yuh come here two years ago. . . ."

"Then keep your damned trap shut," snapped Powell.

"If yuh feel that way, then I will." Again the big sheepman shook back his shoulders. "On the other hand, Mark, I ain't the kind of a man yuh could bust in the puss like yuh did Trigg an' Sunny Jim."

"No?" Lower jaw thrust forward, the sheriff was glowering at the man now, his hands opening and closing.

"Yuh heard what I said." There was a low, rumbling growl in the sheepman's tone. "An' any ol' time, Mr. Mark Powell, that it sorter cuts yore fancy to crawl on Sid Turner, just come wadin' right in, brother. The water ain't deep."

"Get this gang out of here!" With a whirl away from the man, Powell spoke to Dunn and Porter now. "Clear the office."

"As I was sayin', Mark," a thick, hairy forefinger poked Powell in the back, "the water ain't deep . . ."

Powell had no answer for him. He walked on, slamming himself into his old swivel chair behind his desk.

CHAPTER V

Rebuffing a Posse

There were many things The Kid wanted to ask old Pop Warner—grizzled, two-gun fighting man, a former sheriff, many times a deputy sheriff, three times a U. S. deputy marshal, twice a rail-

road special agent, and once, in the far past, an outlaw with a price on his head. But there was no time now for questions. Questions could wait.

For they were being pursued by a dozen riders. They kept to the river, Pop Warner leading the way on his roan.

One thing was in their favor. The sun had already dropped behind the shaggy crags of a tall range of mountains. The shadows of night were gathering, stretching their fantastic shapes along the river. Once darkness settled, The Kid knew that Pop Warner could lose them from the hardest riding posse that ever forked horses.

Old Monte was a devil on hoofs, a horse that would bite or kick when the slightest opportunity afforded. But he had one virtue. He could run.

Rough country meant no more to him than smooth. His running was a long, shambling, cork-screwing twist, his hoofs making a harsh, double-rolling and clattering sound that carried about as much rhythm as a sick cow bawling in a bog-hole during a hot summer's day.

Old Monte, wall-eyed and high-headed, was an ugly brute at best—long, raw-boned, with a rump that seemed to have been hacked off with one stroke of a knife. He was rough enough in all his gaits to rattle a man's jaw teeth and jar his kidneys loose.

Both horses were slinging sweat-lather by the time darkness settled. The river valley had narrowed, and rounding a sudden bend in a wall of rimrocks, they came to a place where the stream roared with the noise of a tornado out of the dark mouth of a tunnel under the foot of a black cliff.

Here the going was rough. Old Monte slipped to one knee as Warner led the way up a steep, trough-like trail in the black rocks. The Kid slashed him down across the rump with his long reins, not so much because of the near-accident but because it was the first time he had known the old horse to do such a thing.

Shots cried through the air overhead and to their right and left as they mounted higher and higher in the rocks, heading for a narrow, V-shaped pass.

The riders behind were rapidly closing the distance between them and the foot of the cliff. The Kid turned in his saddle, churning shots at the group with the jail rifle, but Warner ignored the shooting, concentrating all effort with quirt and spur to reach the safety of that narrow notch in the rocks ahead.

"We'll stand 'em back when we get there," he yelled over his shoulder. "Save yore lead, son."

It looked as though it was raining bullets by the time they reached the pass. As Pop Warner and The Kid jerked their horses to a halt, the firing suddenly ceased. Only the sound of hoofs on the rocks broke the silence, telling them that the riders were doggedly coming on up the trail.

"Easy, son." Warner's voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "Here's somethin' what'll beat lead all to glory right now."

The old man had laid down his rifle. He was struggling now with a round black stone nearly as large as a barrel. The Kid dropped his rifle, and turned to help him.

"It's the ticket, once we get 'er goin'," whispered Warner, straining at the stone. "That trail's like a trough to keep this thing rollin' clear to the bottom. A man down there on a hoss will just have to figure himself a way to run."

It took muscle-straining work to move the stone. Once started, it threatened to balk on them; but they kept it going, working it forward. In another minute it was rolling, wabbling from side to side, crushing smaller rocks under it. There was a bounce-like motion, and then it was gathering momentum.

"Now, son, listen for the yells," gasped Warner, breathing heavily from his effort. "It just can't fail."

They came in a few moments, the first

a wild, cat-squawling, sharply piercing cry and a sudden scrambling and pawing of hoofs. It was followed instantly by another hoarse, *hoot*-like crying that became a massed wailing and cursing, filled with the terror-stricken beat of hoofs, the snorting of horses.

"Turn, boys, *turn!*" shrilled somebody.

"Give 'em another barrel," Pop Warner chuckled as he turned to another stone, one that was even larger than the first. "Yuh allus follow up a little surprise with another'n just a shade bigger, when yuh can. Come on, quick."

The second stone, moving easier than the first in spite of its size, was soon rolling lopsidedly on its way, and now the scrambling and clawing of hoofs below was rising to a din. The posse turned back, riding desperately to reach the foot of the slope.

It was quiet in a few minutes, and now the moon came stealing over the rim of the cliffs. By its light, Warner and The Kid, hidden in the inky shadow of the pass, saw the massed group of horsemen returning to the valley.

"Right nice, don'tcha think, Kid?" Pop Warner grinned. "I had this very thing in mind when we left the jail."

"We could have given them a few more rocks, Pop." The Kid was rolling a cigarette. "About a couple more."

"Uh-huh," cut in the old man with a nod, "but that ain't the right an' proper way. First, yo're apt to hurt nothin' but the hoss a man's ridin'. Second, son, these rocks might come in handy at some other time. I noticed how purty they was the first time I rode through the pass. Yuh never waste such things. Yuh use just enough of yore tools on hand to finish a job, an' yuh sorter save the rest for another job. I'll have a couple of men here to watch this place inside of an hour."

"And in the meanwhile," The Kid touched a match to his cigarette and quickly whipped out the flame, "that gang'll go on around another way and head us off."

"They can't do 'er, Kid," Warner smiled. "That's where we hold the edge. This is the only place where a man can get in or outa Fryin' Pan Canyon on a hoss. That's Fryin' Pan just ahead of us. It's forty miles wide, not countin' the 'handle' . . . an' we're at the tip of the handle right here. It's

walled in by cliffs, most of 'em runnin' close to a thousan' feet."

"And what's in this Frying Pan?"

"A lot of damned sheep an' a few herds of fine cows. It was on the Diamond Bar Diamond, yuh see," his eyes twinkled in the darkness, "that they tell me I stuck a knife between Dan Glover's ribs not so many days ago an' robbed the pore devil on the spot."

"So that was what they had you for." The Kid's eyes narrowed as a pull at his cigarette lighted his face.

"Just what I was locked up for, yeah," Warner nodded. "It was a neat job, Kid. Damned if I didn't get to believin' it myself before Mark Powell an' his gang was done. Dan was killed with my ol' huntin' knife. Dan's pocketbook was found in the mattress of my bunk in the bunkhouse. His watch-chain with a twenty-dollar gold piece on it an' a diamond as big as yore thumbnail in the middle of the coin was found in the watch-pocket of my pants. The watch was found sewed in the skirts of my old saddle."

"Cagey old devil of late, eh?" A slow grin moved The Kid's lips. "I never knew you were that smart, Pop."

"Well, yuh learn as yuh grow older, son," Warner chuckled, "I thought it was right

smart an' brilliant. Smartest thing of it all, though, was when I confessed. Yes, sir!" He nodded. "Told Mark Powell an' his deputies just how I'd done it. On the quiet, of course.

"I didn't do it in front of the Diamond Bar Diamond boys," he continued, "though I'm damned if they didn't get mad as hell an' want to hang me to a limb on the spot. Mighta done it if it hadn't been for Nanka. There's a gal, Kid, what'll turn yore eyeballs upside down an' sorter give yuh a rattlin' in yore gizzard. She stuck up for me, even when a couple of sheepmen stuck their bills in an' swore they'd heard me confess."

"Tight spot!"

"Sure. The Diamond Bar Diamond boys got mad as hell about it, Kid."

"I'd think they would," grinned The Kid. "But where do we go from here, Pop?"

"Why, to the Diamond Bar Diamond, of course," exclaimed the old man. "I was allus hell to see a job finished, once it got started. Much obliged for gettin' me outa jail."

"Mention it again," growled The Kid, "and I'll kick a couple of your ribs loose."

CHAPTER VI

The Kid Meets Nanka

"The duck with his throat cut?"

Pop Warner pulled rein as they were riding down the slope and The Kid finished telling him about the dead man he had found south of Lone Deer and the coming of the sheriff and the deputies.

"Very simple. Several cases like that have happened in these parts in the past couple of years. The note tied to that bronc's mane. . . . Well, here's what it meant, Kid, if yuh can get the point."

He opened his collar and struck a match. The Kid leaned close to him and saw a thin, newly healed scar that ran across Warner's throat from ear to ear.

"Just that," he nodded. "I'm a duck what was given the hint, but it didn't take. Right atter I hit town, I was havin' a drink in The Hawg an' Whistle. A shot of whiskey with a beer to chase 'er with. Don't think I had but two drinks. I woke up sommers atter midnight, lyin' just like the duck yuh saw killed. Staked out on my back, hoss standin' close to me with a little rusty fryin' pan an' a box of matches tied to his mane.

"Somebody had cut my throat just enough to grain the hide. I didn't have no trouble to pull the stakes an' get up. It didn't take more'n one eye an' hawg sense to know that I'd been invited to leave Lone Deer right pronto. I come to the Diamond Bar Diamond instead."

"Nice people around here, eh?"

"Oh, shore." Warner laughed as they rode on. "The big thing is just this. The sheepmen are here to stick an' run the cowmen out."

"I'm wise to that."

"An' it looks just about like the sheepmen have won. . . ."

They wound on down the steep trail and came to Danger River. To their left the river entered the tunnel under the tall cliff, making a noise like ever-growling thunder as the swift waters narrowed for their furious plunge.

"This is the place ever' sheepman wants," explained Warner as they rode up the bank of the stream in the moonlight.

"Some herds have moved in bodily. They got the jump on pore ol' Dan Glover right before he knowed what was happenin'. From talk I overheard last night in jail, three more big herds are comin' in, inside of a week. That'll just about take the Canyon away from Nanka.

"And I don't like some of the men ridin' for her," he added, glancing at The Kid with his lips suddenly curled. "They won't do. I tried to tell Dan that, but my proof was low. Pore devil."

They passed three huge sheep camps lying on the opposite side of the river. There were at least six herders lounging around fires at each camp.

"In five years," growled Warner, "if they stay in here, this fine grazin' land will be as bare as a desert floor. A sheep's poison." Always a cowman at heart, he added that bitterly.

"It's damnation," he continued. "It kills the grass to the last root, but a sheepman don't care. If they was as low in stature as they are in deed an' principle, ary damned one of 'em could kiss a rattlesnake's belly without bendin' his knees.

"Smell the stink? It's Gawd-awful. But wait'll spring comes agin an' they start shearin'. Yuh can smell a sheep camp then from five miles. An' let a sheep die an' swell up an' stink so's yuh can't get in a mile of it, an' yuh won't wait long until yuh see some herder out pullin' the wool off the damned thing an' pokin' it in a sack."

He was in a nasty mood when they topped a small rise along the river bank and came in sight of the houses, corrals, barns and sheds of the Diamond Bar Diamond.

The buildings were of log and stone, both gathered from along the river. It was a restful looking place, the main house low and roomy with a great porch facing the river. They were dropping reins at the hitch-rack under the trees in front of the porch a few minutes later.

"Hello!" yelled Warner as two big, brown dogs trotted off the porch to greet them with growls. "Nanka!"

The girl answered a few moments later, coming out of the house in a riding skirt, high-heeled boots and a dark shirt-waist. The Kid saw that she was tall, dark-haired, wide-eyed and pretty. She was, he judged, about twenty, decidedly fair. She drove the growling dogs back as the pair swung out of their saddles. The Kid removed his hat.

"I'm back," said Warner, simply. "Is the rope still ready an' waitin' for me?"

"Oh, it's you!" At the moment The Kid could not tell whether the girl was to be friendly to Warner or not. "How . . . how did you manage it?"

"My pard showed up," grinned the old man. "I told yuh he would one of these days. Nanka, meet The Powder River Kid. Right name's Pete . . . Pete Clark."

"I'm glad to meet you," bowed The Kid, his voice a mumble as the girl spoke and thrust out her hand, Western fashion. "Pop's told me several things. After a little set-to in Lone Deer, I don't know how long we'll be able to stay here, but if there's anything we can do . . . well, we're aching to try it."

"Yuh had better," Warner's voice had lowered cautiously, "send Chuck an' Silver down to the pass, Nanka. Let 'em hold it."

He told her then of all that had happened, of the getaway from the jail, of turning the posse back.

"I've still got that plan," Pop continued, constantly glancing to the right and left, "that yuh an' me an' yore daddy talked about. What I saw comin' up the river just a few minutes ago makes it look about right for things to happen. The camps are on the river bank right above the deep, swift water. The right kind of play would rid this canyon of sheep in about thirty minutes. Yuh know what I mean."

Nanka glanced around. "This is not the place to talk about that, Pop. But I'm glad you're back. I suppose you knew I would be."

"Sure," he chuckled. "Why, honey, I'd a-been here long 'fore now if The Kid hadn't been so danged long gettin' to Lone Deer."

"Then come in," requested the girl. "We'll talk later. Just now, Pop, you and Pete are in time for supper."

A little, squint-eyed, bow-legged cowboy called Tummy came forward to take the horses to the corrals. That Pop Warner trusted the man was evident. He spoke to him in a low, guarded tone.

"Give them a good feeding, Tummy. We may have to use them again before morning. Unsaddle them for now, and saddle us a couple more. Better get a horse ready for yourself, but say nothing until I give the word. Yuh sabe, don'tcha, son?"

"Allus did, Pop." The man spoke with a lowered tone. "I reckon yuh knowed that all along."

"Sure thing," grinned the old man, and with that they followed Nanka Glover into the big house, through the long, broad living room with its huge fireplace, its tables, books, and comfortable chairs, to the dining room. The Kid and Pop Warner took places at the long table at which thirteen men sat, the most of them rough looking, half of them bearded and sullen eyed.

Wyoming Frank Riley, a big, buck-toothed, yellow-haired man, stood up. His face had become colorless in the lamplight, his steely gray eyes narrow. He spoke raspingly, his big, warty hands gripping the edge of the table.

"I'm through, Miss Nanka," he announced, bitterly. "I'll set at no damned table with a dirty killer like Pop Warner. If yuh had the respect of a billy goat for yore father that we buried a few days ago, yuh wouldn't stand for that man comin' in this house, much less invitin' the ol' skinny buzzard in here to eat at Dan Glover's table. Them's my sentiments, an' I speak 'em plain an' straight from my shoulder."

"Wyomin' says just what I think!" Another man had popped up, and afterwards The Kid was to know that his name was Zeck Muldoon. Like Riley, his face had become colorless, eyes narrow and glinty. "I ain't no man to play the hypocrite. Wyomin's been cow boss of this spread nearly two years now. . . ."

"Yeah," cut in Warner, "since just right atter Mark Powell blowed into Lone Deer lookin' for a soft job an' a lot of fools to help 'im make it for 'imself."

"Yuh won't talk to me like that outside!" rasped Riley.

"Nor me, either!" A third man had surged to his feet.

He was older than the others, somewhere around sixty. Tall and lean, he could have passed as a running mate for Warner, except that he was smooth-shaven and bald. A big Colt hung at his hip. His voice carried a strange, half-whistling whine.

"Yuh can count me, Miss Nanka, off yore bed an' board, too. Utah Jake McCandles ain't a man to beat 'round the bushes with his feelin's."

"Any more of yuh gents feel the same way?" A grin was on Warner's grizzled face now as he looked up and down the table. "I reckon we might as well cast a vote on it. I . . ."

"That is not at all necessary," Nanka Glover was finding her voice at last. "I am, first of all, owner of this ranch since my father died. I will say who sits at this table and who will not."

"Easy, little 'un!" Warner held up his hand. "I'm still sayin' I'd like to put this thing to a vote." His tone rose into a bark as the girl started to say something else. "I'm handlin' this! I don't believe Wyomin's got friends enough with the guts to stand up ag'in' me."

"I'll call that, Warner." A tall, blond-mustached man by the name of Burt Wheeler suddenly kicked back his chair. "I've got nerve enough to call you or anybody else."

"Makes four of yuh, don't it?" The grin widened on Warner's face. His voice was low, not at all excited now. "An' I been thinkin' 'bout this these nights I've been lyin' in jail. Sic 'em, Pete! Yuh sabe."

"Sure, I get you." The Kid had stepped

to one side now, his old Colt leaping into his right hand. "Reach for the ceiling, you dudes. *Reach!*"

"Yeah, that'll be so much better, boys." Guns had come into Pop Warner's hands, big, ugly old guns that had been his best friends in many fights. He was still grinning that little grin. His voice was calm, but there was something deadly and dangerous in his glinty old eyes.

"Turn yore backs an' face the wall," he barked. "Charley Butler, yuh can go for'ard an' collect up the hardware. The boys are right apt to hurt 'emselves, and tonight we play a tune where we don't want too many folks hurt."

Others at the table were open-mouthed. The rest grinned. A fat man with a hare-lip half-hidden behind sandy mustaches, chuckled, and promptly got up from the table to help Butler take the weapons from the four facing the wall. He spoke, the ugly gash in his upper lip giving his voice a fluttery sound.

"Don't know what yore game is, Pop, but just count me in."

The guns of the four men were collected in a few seconds. Butler searched them, and found smaller six-shooters artfully hidden in the bosoms of both Wyoming Frank and Zeck Muldoon.

"Now," ordered Warner, quietly, "help

yoreself to some of them saddle strings hangin' on that nail over there an' tie 'em all up good an' stout. Then I'd like 'em stuck in that little stone bunkhouse. Yuh boys'll then take Dan Glover's ol' scatter guns an' sorter mount guard to see that these birds don't take a sneak-out on us durin' the night. Yuh may not know it, but they're right valuable in two or three ways."

"Yo'll pay for this, Warner," rasped Wyoming Frank as the hare-lipped man finished tying his hands behind his bank. "And I'll get that slick-lookin' dude there beside yuh when I do pay up. I'll hunt yuh both to hell for this!"

"Drag 'em out, boys," snapped Warner. "Nanka ain't gettin' no particular fun that I can see by standin' here an' havin' to lis'en to a double-crossin' snake hiss an' sling his poison."

They tried to fight then. They tried to kick. The hare-lipped man had to knock Burt Wheeler down with the barrel of his gun. In a snarling and cursing mass, the men were ushered outside.

"Another one of yuh dudes had better stay with Charley an' Whistlin' Hank," Warner went on. "Gag them dudes if they get to makin' too much racket. The rest of yuh will saddle broncs in a hurry. Me an' The Kid'll have a bite to eat."

A big-eyed, immensely fat Swedish woman now appeared from the kitchen, bringing in a tray laden with food. The Kid took a cup of coffee. Warner banged into a chair and started eating like a half-starved wolf. The men had filed out, to leave the big housekeeper and cook, Nanka Glover, The Kid and Warner in the room.

"I seem powerful slow of late, Nanka." The old man looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "Hard, somehow, to get started. But tonight we seem to be gettin' our spurs, so to speak. 'Fore mornin' I expect a lot of action."

"Very fast action, yes," said a voice at the window beyond the foot of the long table. "You have that reputation, Warner . . . now that I know exactly who you are!"

They looked up with a start, and stared

into the shining tubes of two double-barrel shotguns covering them from the window. Over the tubes of one of the guns gleamed the cold, dark eyes of the sheriff of Lone Deer.

CHAPTER VII
A Raid by Jubilee Bill

Six men came into the room with guns in their hands. Warner and The Kid were backed to the wall, their weapons hastily taken from them. Sheriff Mark Powell sauntered in with a grin curling his lips.

"I left town about thirty minutes after the other boys, Warner," he explained. "Met them coming back. A nice little trick you worked up there in the pass, wasn't it?"

"I'm handy at such things now an' then," smiled the old man, grimly. "Just like yuh an' the rest of yore gang seem so damned handy about a lot of things in these parts, Powell."

"Only, of course," sneered the sheriff, "you know now that the name's not Powell. . . . A letter you wrote for that fool of a Trigg Porter didn't make the mails. No fault of Trigg's. He was just dumb enough not to have mailed it this morning. It made very interesting reading and seems to be the third one you've written. Nice, wasn't it?"

He was walking slowly forward, and now had halted in front of Warner with a leer on his face. "'It seems sorter nice to be back in the harness again.' That was one of your lines. I suspected there was a lot to you from the beginning. That was why I played my cards so slowly, you damned old buzzard."

"Yeah, yo're a powerful smart man, ain't yuh, *Mr. Jubilee Bill Fanningway?* Yuh hitched yoreself up in these parts a couple of years ago on the run. Yuh come to town an' told folks yuh was lookin' for Jubilee Bill . . . an' all the time, mister, yuh was that very Mr. Jubilee Bill. Yuh got yore set-in strong, had some of yore ol' gang sneak off a hundred miles or so now an' then an' do a Jubilee Bill Fanningway job just to make things look regular, an' folks fell good an' hard for yore line."

"Some still fall, Warner." The sheriff hissed the words. "My old gang is right here with me tonight, every one of them. It might be news to you to know that the man sent in here to help you a couple of days ago was the man your pardner—this slick-faced duck here beside you—found with his damned throat slit from ear to ear."

"Yuh shore speak plain when yuh speak, don'tcha?"

"There's always a time and a place where a man can, Warner. This is one of them." He looked as if he wanted to laugh. "You've made it possible with your damned snooping. A federal agent again, eh?"

Suddenly he slapped the old man across the face. "Nice old man! Where's your damned badge? We searched your junk very closely. I suspicioned you from the start, you old devil!"

"I sorter thought yuh did." Another grin moved Warner's old lips in spite of a thin stream of blood now oozing from the corners of his mouth. "Fact is, yuh showed it strong the day Burt Wheeler an' Wyomin' Frank killed Dan Glover an' atterwards planted his watch an' truck on me. I just wasn't in no fix to say much that day. Thought it kinda best to play my cards close to my belly."

"And now what?" sneered the sheriff. "Think you've got another little card or two up your sleeve?"

"There's times when I just don't think, Fanningway," smiled the old man. "Yuh seem to have the bull smack by the tail this time. What do yuh aim to do 'bout it? Bump us all off in a wad, I

guess. It's generally the way yuh play, if yore rep's got anything to do with it."

"And you, smart fellow!" The sheriff had suddenly turned upon The Kid. "How does it feel now? Want a gun, do you? Like to play the fool again and get the drop on somebody?"

"Wouldn't mind it, if chance offered." The Kid was looking at him steadily, still standing there with his hands lifted to a level with his shoulders. "There's no use lying about it."

"Slick work, boys." Wyoming Frank Riley and Burt Wheeler were suddenly coming back into the room, showing that some of the sheriff's gang had released them. "Let me at that damned Warner. I made 'im a promise. Right here I'll keep it!"

"I'm handling this, Wyoming!" The sheriff glanced at him. For a split-second the attention of the others had been attracted. "I'm still boss of . . . *Look out!*"

The Kid had moved. As swiftly as a striking snake, he had lurched forward. His left hand grabbed the sheriff by the right shoulder, shoving him. His right hand darted downward, snatching one of the fine six-shooters from the man's belts.

They lurched savagely against the table. There was a crash of dishes and glass, the sound of the table overturning, the lamp falling and smashing on the floor, throwing the room into sudden darkness.

A shot crashed in the darkness, licking a flame of red at the spot where Pop Warner had been standing. The screams of terror from a woman and a girl followed, then the wild scramble of feet, the weirdly musical sound of rapidly clanking spurs.

Again the wild flashing of a gun lighted the white, bloodless face of a girl who had leaped back into the doorway to the living room and had halted to shoot into the swarming and bellowing mass of men.

CHAPTER VIII
Shots in the Dark

The biting smell of burned powder. . . . Men rushing from the door as if the hounds of hell were after them. . . . A struggle still going on there in the wreckage of the table. . . . Burt Wheeler and Wyoming Frank Riley sobbing and blubbering with their mouths choked with blood as they lay dying, their scores settled by a fight-drunk daughter of the man they had murdered. . . .

Then a sickening smack, and sudden quiet. The hoarse, whispering voice of old Pop Warner broke it.

"Are yuh all right, Kid?"

"Okay, Pop," answered a tense voice. "Be with you in just a minute. I'm locking your sheriff's hands behind his back with his own damned handcuffs."

"Nanka," whispered the old man now. "Nanka, where are yuh?"

"Here!" gasped a weak voice. "I'm . . . all . . . right, Pop."

"An' Miz Sally?"

A broken voice in the corner behind the cupboard answered. "I tank I bane shot. I bane vet vith blood."

But she was neither shot nor bloody, and in a few moments Pop Warner learned something else that was gratifying to his old soul. Four of the Diamond Bar Diamond riders who had been made prisoners by the sheriff's men in front of the house, had escaped during the excitement. They had gained the living room, and one of them had promptly blown out the light.

"Yo're shore yo've got the king-pin safe an' sound?" he whispered to The Kid.

"Like a bug in a rug," chuckled The Kid.

"He's mighty quiet about it, son."

"Yeah, I know. I had to hit 'im pretty hard with his own gun. Maybe just a shade too hard, Pop."

It was quiet outside now. Too quiet. Not a man could be seen stirring out there in the darkness. Warner and The Kid

dragged the limp figure of the sheriff into an inside room, fitted a gag to his mouth and tied him securely to an iron ring in an old trap-door leading to a cellar under the house.

Wyoming Frank and Wheeler were dragged in, and another man was found under the wreckage of the table. He was as limp as death, his guns still in his holsters. The Kid closed the door, and as there were no windows in the walls of this room, he struck a match. It was this act of caution that probably saved the woman and the girl.

With his old quickness, The Kid leaped on the man, pinning his hands and arms to the floor.

"Get 'im," he hissed. "It's Walt Dunn . . . and he's not hurt."

Dunn made a desperate fight of it until The Kid smashed him down across the head with the barrel of his gun. The big deputy rolled back with a groan, his body suddenly limp.

"Played shut-eye on us," whispered The Kid as they thrust the deputy's hands and arms inside the sheriff's and locked the wrists together with a second pair of handcuffs. "Smart guy after all. Was just waiting his chance."

"Gag 'im," grunted Warner. "Tear off his shirt-tail if yuh can't find nothin' else. We don't want 'im yellin' his head off when he wakes up."

They were taking stock of themselves a few minutes later. Out of the ten Diamond Bar Diamond riders, they found that the four men in the darkness of the living room were all that had regained the house. They rearmed themselves and were now wondering just what to do.

"Charley Butler an' Whistlin' Hank was shot down without warnin'," whispered one of the cowboys. "Didn't have a chance. Mark Powell musta come here with at least a dozen men. They scattered out an' had us surrounded 'fore we knowed what was happenin'. I've got a bullet in my shoulder. Fiddle Face, over there, has got a hole through his thigh. It ain't gonna hurt our fightin', though. We can still handle a gun."

"Where's Tummy?" whispered Warner.

"Don't know," answered the cowboy. "Can't 'count for nobody but what's right here. Tummy was in the stables when I last saw 'im. Might still be out there. There's no way of tellin'."

"We oughta got men to the pass sooner," grumbled Warner. "I guess there was just too much on our hands. Damn it!"

"No use fretting about it now," The Kid said. "It looks to me like we're doing mighty well for a starter."

"Well, maybe so," muttered Warner. "Still, son, I never like one of these games where yuh find yoreself in a pickle that says yuh can't go for'ard or back'ard."

"Just the same, Pop, we've got Jubilee Bill and the man who played his shadow. With a mask over their faces and their hair dyed a little, either Burt Wheeler or Wyoming Frank could have played that rôle handsomely."

"Jubilee Bill!" whispered a cowboy. "Say, that's the bad duck ever'body was lookin' for a couple of years ago! Less time than that. Why, I reckon it wasn't no more than two months ago. . . ."

"That yuh heard of 'im, yeah!" nodded Warner. " 'Bout the only one workin' for 'im, I reckon, what didn't know who he was was that fool Trigg Porter. But Jubilee Bill's in the other room now, fastened to the ring in that old door leadin' to the cellar. Yuh boys didn't maybe hear the squabble in the kitchen, but Mark Powell an' Jubilee Bill are the same folks."

"Well, f'gosh sakes!" exclaimed a man farther away in the darkness. "An' . . . an' that only makes us wanta know more 'bout yuh an' the fella with yuh, Pop."

"All of which," chuckled Warner, "will come out in the wash."

"Mark!" That was a distant voice out-

side calling now. "Oh, Mark! What in hell's doin' in there?"

A shot and a wild braying of laughter, coming from the same direction, answered the man.

"I'm tellin' yuh, boys, we're stuck," moaned a voice in a ravine on a short rise a hundred yards east of the big, dark ranchhouse. "Damn it all, the boss is still in there. He's either dead or tied up so's he can't let out a peep."

"We've been in worse jams than this," whispered another voice.

"An' pulled out of 'em, yeah," added the third voice. "Hell, Spider, there's nothin' to weep about just yet."

"He takes too many chances of late," complained the first speaker. "It's a habit, I reckon, for a man to do that when he's got ever'thing by the tail an' a downhill drag like we've had for so long now. The first thing he oughta done in there was to snap handcuffs on them squirts."

That they were sick of the sudden, wholly unexpected set-back in their plans was a certainty. Waiting and watching bore heavily upon them. Not a confounded sound would come from that infernal house. Not a sound had come from it, and waiting like this in the darkness, never knowing what was going to happen, put them on edge.

They heard the man somewhere down there in a ravine south of the house call the sheriff. They heard the shot, and then that wild cackling and braying of laughter. When an hour passed and they heard nothing else, they were ready to do anything, out of sheer desperation.

"I'm for openin' up on that damned house an' stickin' it full of lead," finally whimpered the man called Spider. "Damn it, boys, I don't like this business. It don't listen good to me."

"Yeah," sneered a man. "Yo're smart, Spider. Open up on that house, an' it might be just our luck to kill the boss with the first shot. Keep yore shirt on. It ain't costin' nothin' to wait, an' that's all we can do."

"Where's Wyomin'?"

"Went down at the first crack of the shootin'. That fool gal let 'im have it. I saw 'er get Wheeler, too."

"An' I shot twice at her, purty as she is, an' missed," grunted the third man. "Maybe she figured she had a call atter what Warner said. I reckon she did, too, seein' as how the old devil called the spades

spades. Wyomin' an' Burt's been playin' a hard game."

"Retribution. Ain't that the word . . . ?"

The man broke off abruptly to turn on his heels, right hand going to the butt of one of his guns.

A gravel had moved somewhere, the faintest sound of a noise. Silence followed it, and minutes dragged by with the silence unbroken. The men in the ravine were holding their breaths.

"What yuh call 'magination," whispered Spider at last. "I . . ."

"Fool," hissed the man at his right. "Hush!"

Another noise came then. It was a short, bounce-like sound between them and the house. They whirled, rising in a crouch, their guns out now, eyes narrow and steely, each holding his breath. A voice spoke to them from behind, a low, guarded voice but one that carried a hard, purring sound that shocked them like a slap of ice-water spilled down their backs.

"Easy, dudes. You're covered. Drop your guns. Reach or die right there in your tracks."

Spider Berry was killed on the spot. He could not help it. He whirled, hands jerking, the big gun in his right hand barking, its funneling gash of flame burning a hot streak across the back of the man's neck at his right.

As answer a six-shooter roared out its thundering streak of flame down on him from behind a clump of brush on the upper rim of the ravine. A bullet struck his chest, splintered into four pieces because the original owner of the six-shooter always made it a point to split his bullets so that they would do this very thing. Berry plunged backward, killed as though he had been shot with a machine-gun.

"Die if you want to!" hissed the voice behind the brush, speaking to the other two now. "It'll probably save your necks from spoiling damned good rope in the end."

"Gawd!" groaned one of the men, rising shakily to his feet, his guns dropping in the weeds. *"Gawd!"*

"Don't . . . don't shoot us!" pleaded the other man, also rising. "Don't do it, pardner. Who . . . who are yuh, anyhow?"

It was The Powder River Kid, frozen into a wicked crouch behind the brush.

CHAPTER IX
Bullets Start Flying

Unwilling to remain in the house, The Kid had found one of the shotguns in the kitchen. Wandering around in the darkness of the house, Nanka Glover had finally told him of the old tunnel leading from the cellar to a tumble-down cookhouse, used years before, that stood two rods in rear of the present kitchen. The rest had been a fairly simple matter for The Kid.

He had carefully taken stock of the situation. Bushes growing around the broken stones of the old cook-house had concealed him as he wiggled along flat on his stomach to a shallow wash which led uphill to the ravine. He had crossed the ravine on his hands and knees, wormed along through rocks, bushes and weeds, and had come to the clump of brush above the men.

A dead man lay below him now, sprawled against the bank of the ravine, his head twisted to one side, the moon looking calmly down on the upturned face. The man's companions held their hands straight above their heads.

And now The Kid heard someone else coming, a short, bow-legged figure hurrying along in the weeds and bushes. It was the little cowboy called Tummy.

"Don't shoot, pard," he called out in a low voice. "It's me. I know who yuh are, but I can't figure how yuh got here so quiet-like. Thought I was watchin' ever'thing plenty close."

One of the men in the ravine had a pair of handcuffs hanging in his belts. While The Kid watched and kept them covered, Tummy scooted down, locking the men's wrists together and searching them. The Kid picked up the shotgun and eased on down in the ravine.

"Got to get out of here," he whispered. "Gag 'em with their neckerchiefs, Tummy. We must work fast."

One of the men started to yell. The Kid struck him across the head with the barrel of the shotgun. They were gagged and hurried along the ravine.

"I killed m'self one of 'em," whispered the bow-legged cowboy. "The one that started to call Mark Powell. He's over here in a wash with the top of his head shot out."

Men tried to get to them. The kid, hearing them coming, opened fire with the shotgun on a clump of brush. Somebody cursed, and then there were the sounds of running feet.

Keeping down, prodding their prisoners with their guns and making them crawl,

they were back at the old cook-house when they heard a large party of horsemen coming up the river from the direction of the sheep camps.

"They sent for help," remarked The Kid grimly. "All right, Tummy, the more the merrier. We still hold the show."

From the house now a rolling blast of firing arose. Flames of fire jerked in the darkness and moonlight. The coming horsemen scattered, cursing at the tops of their lungs. In the din of the shooting, Pop Warner's voice was bawling out an order.

"Wait! Make sure who they are first."

"We know who they are," yelled a voice. "Hell, don't we know the horses of them sheep outfits? One of these snakes went for he'p, an' right here it is."

The house was surrounded even before The Kid and Tummy could get their sullen prisoners through the old tunnel and up into the room where the sheriff and Dunn lay. Shots started coming thicker now. Bullets whistled in at the windows, struck the sides of the buildings, and then came to a staggering halt as a man called out a warning in a long-drawling voice.

"The boss is in there, yuh fools. The boss, I tell yuh. Mark Powell, the sheriff, damn it!"

It promised to be a siege now. The horsemen had fallen back, out of sight. Once more a hush held the canyon.

When morning finally came, it was still like that. But in the distance, well out of rifle range, the group in the house could see horsemen galloping this way and that.

"Not afraid of anything happenin' to 'em," speculated Pop Warner with a growl. "But yuh shore got the edge on 'em when yuh took in our good friend Jubilee Bill. How's he feelin' 'bout it all by this time?"

"I took the gag out of his mouth a little while ago," grinned The Kid. "He still thinks he's king-pin of the world. Says we haven't got a chance and that we'll stay here until we rot or his gang'll whip us out. I put the gag back and left him to go on thinking that."

Breakfast time came. They opened canned meats and started a blaze in the fireplace for the coffee.

"No danger much of 'em shootin' in here," explained Warner, "but they would try it on yuh passin' back an' forth to the stove in the kitchen."

It was a good breakfast, especially when the big cook crawled out in the kitchen to sit on the floor and make a large pan of hot cake batter that they cooked on the fire in the living room. Both Pop Warner and The Kid had fared worse many times in their lives. They had also had better.

"But this is plumb sumptious, anyhow," grinned Warner. "Danged if I don't sorter like it, Nanka. It ain't at all like a time me an' The Kid was holed up in rocks a solid week once down on the Big Horn. Wasn't water or nothin' else down there."

Noon came, and with it a white shirt flying from a stick on a knoll east of the house. Pop Warner finally answered it by hanging a white towel out a kitchen window on the end of a broom-handle. Then,

as nervous as a cat caught on a pond of ice, Jack Loft, the goose-necked, pop-eyed deputy, appeared, coming haltingly down the hill. He ventured on until he was within a rod of the back door.

"We . . . we decided to give yuh birds a break," he stammered when Warner and The Kid faced him from a window. "We . . . we want our men outa there. We'll give yuh a chance to make a sneak of it if yo'll do it, Warner. We'll do it even if Mark won't agree."

"Well, that's right nice of yuh, Jack." Warner's wrinkled face twisted into a grin. "I reckon I'd take yuh up on it, but I like it here so well I haven't the least notion of leavin'. What else did them yellow-bellied whelps up there tell yuh to say?"

"That's about all they told me, Warner." The man glanced at the ground. Warner and The Kid noticed that he had left his guns with the men waiting for him. "I'd . . . er . . . sorter like to talk to Mark an' Walt, if yuh don't mind."

"They ain't receivin' company, Jack."

"No?" Loft looked up quickly. "Yuh mean by that . . ."

"Nope, I ain't sayin' what I mean." Warner laughed now. "I know what yuh come for. Tell yuh what, though. We've got five men out there in yore clutches. Give 'em to us, an' we'll give yuh two of yores. If . . ."

"Don't make no barg'in with 'em!" bellowed a voice from the direction of the little stone bunkhouse. "We can get at them, but they can't get at us through these thick walls."

"Which," nodded Warner, "seems to sorter speak for itself, Jack. I reckon my proposition's off. Anything else yuh wanta say?"

"I want to know," the little man was getting desperate, "if Mark Powell's alive in that house. I want to know if Walt Dunn's alive."

"That's exactly what I figured yuh would wanta know." A growl had come into the old man's voice. "Go back an' tell yore bunch to come ahead."

"Then . . . then they *are* dead?"

"Sure!" lied Warner. "There ain't none of yore gang in here what ain't dead, Jack."

"That's all I wanted to know!" Loft's voice was a yell. He turned and ran. "Maybe yo'll wanta trade next time, yuh ol' devil!"

"Yeah, an' maybe we will," growled Warner, stepping back from the window. "But, anyhow, it'll stave off this waitin'. We'll shore enough fight now, Kid. Yuh might as well get ready for it."

It came a minute later. Rifles crashed in a circle around the buildings and corrals. Bullets whistled, slapped the walls of the house, glanced off to whine away in the warm air.

CHAPTER X

Clearance of Sheep

It was a scorching hot fight now, the kind old Pop Warner and The Powder River Kid liked. Twice the circle of men around the buildings tried to close in. Twice they were thrown back with six of their men shot down.

Even the little stone bunkhouse turned into an inferno of shooting, which showed that the Diamond Bar Diamond men inside had not only managed to escape but had secured six-shooters as well—weapons that would play the devil in close quarters.

"Only one thing we've got to fear," grumbled Warner during one of the lulls in the firing. "That's wind. With the right wind blowin', they might fire the corrals, an' the hay stacks would do the rest. But it'll take a mighty strong wind."

Wind did come. It came late in the afternoon, but it came from the south, blowing steadily until long after darkness. It died away as the moon swung over the canyon with a strong, yellow light.

The shooting rose and fell, died away for

long intervals at a time to break out furiously again. The little group in the house were well supplied with ammunition, but they were careful enough with it.

They were not discouraged during a fierce fight just before dawn when they again held off the ring of attackers. But the latter's numbers seemed to be increasing constantly as groups of horsemen came into the canyon. That they were sheepmen was a certainty, men sent for and commanded to come or forever lose their

iron grip on the cattleman's paradise of fine rangelands.

"Must be a hundred on us by now," growled Warner as daylight came and the red sun finally stole over the canyon rim. "Still, we're holdin' our own, an' we can be mighty thankful that Dan Glover made these walls thick."

The prisoners were fed. The sheriff and Dunn cursed and argued, had become sleek-tongued and tricky, but it did them not a whit of good. Purely for the humane side of it, The Kid and Warner left off their gags.

One of the men captured by The Kid in the ravine was the first to break. In a fury he cursed the sheriff and Walter Dunn.

"There ain't no murder jobs on me even if I do know 'bout damned near ever' one of 'em!" he snarled. "I'm takin' the easiest way out, tellin' what I know, an' trustin' the rest to Gawd an' luck, 'cause we ain't got a chance of a snowball in hell, an' I ain't fool enough not to know it."

But there was yet no certainty about it. There never was, in an old-fashioned gunfight like this. There were too many men out there for one to tell about this thing. But as the morning wore along with occasional spurts of firing, group after group of horsemen were seen riding southward, toward the pass.

"Some going back to the sheep camps, an' some headin' for Lone Deer," speculated Warner. "I'll bet they're rackin' their heads plumb crazy to know what to do. Ain't it a fine place to fight, Kid? Never saw anything like it. Beats the Big Horn, don't it?"

"But we got licked on the Big Horn, if you haven't forgotten," The Kid reminded him. "Licked four ways for Sunday!"

"An' still come back an' beat 'em in spite of it. . . ."

Noon came, the afternoon, sundown, and then darkness, and the third night of this long-drawn-out fight had settled over the canyon. Clouds had come with it, darkening the sky, and to the growing anxiety of Pop Warner and The Kid, a wind picked up from the north.

At midnight, starved to desperation, three men from the little stone bunkhouse came in, chased by hails of lead from the slope east of the house. They reported as dead Charley Butler and Whistling Hank, the hare-lipped man, killed without even a chance to fight.

A hay stack was fired a short time later, the one closest to the house. As flames shot up, lolling, it looked, for a few minutes, like the end . . . looked as if the burning hay would set fire to the house.

But a prankish switch in the wind drove the flying sparks and licking flames toward the river. It burned part of a corral fence, terrified horses, and finally died down to a great bed of glowing sparks.

Then, as if following a human trait, the worst attack of them all came just before dawn. It was hell, and it was shotgun work at the same time. Men and horses went down, the men cursing, the animals bawling.

In the drunken fit of fighting, seven sheepmen gained the porch. Through a window and the cracked-open front door, The Kid and Pop Warner, backed now by the girl and the Swedish housekeeper, swept the porch clean with buckshot. In the midst of the fight the sheriff started wailing at the top of his voice.

"For God's sake," he howled, "do you want to kill me? Dunn's here with me. Two others of the boys are here."

But the fight was in full swing. Again the ring of men circling the buildings charged, the bulk of them lying on opposite sides of their horses for protection. The house filled with gun smoke. It bit into everyone's lungs, made them drop to the floor gasping for breath. Faces blackened in it. The fighters saved their breaths, grimly holding on, and again an attack was beaten back.

"The oftener they come, the sooner it'll end," gasped Warner. "We still hold trumps, boys. Don't let 'em addle yuh."

Then, just as the first hair-line of dawn made its crawling, crack-like shape above the eastern rim of the canyon, the battle grew into a steady crashing of guns.

The sounds rolled back and forth across the canyon. Swarms of men came close, were driven back, and some took to the river. There were at least a hundred and fifty guns flashing out there now, and it seemed that every sheepman for a hundred miles around had come to join the fight.

Dawn came finally, the light widening over the canyon. Pop Warner started to yell. In the distance, closing in, was a heavy line of fighters—one great ring of booted, chapped and big-hatted men.

A white shirt waved on the end of a stick on a distant knoll west of the river. Gradually the firing died away. A man of six feet, riding a high-strung bay, came galloping down the slope from the east, a star glittering on his chest. It was like the coming of Buffalo Bill in person.

"Easy!" barked Warner, knocking aside a cowboy's gun, and then whirling to throw open the kitchen door. "Hell, boys, this is ol' Buck Vance, sheriff of Pipe Rock. I sent for 'im five days ago. Sent 'im a letter, an' I'm damned if he ain't here with ever' cowboy within a hundred miles."

His voice lifted into a wild yell as he darted out the door. "Hello, Buck! Yuh damned ol' reprobate, where in hell have yuh been so long?"

"Yuh told me to come to Lone Deer, yuh old fool!" Vance was swinging out of his saddle, grinning now.

"I got ever' man I could," he explained, "an' pushed right on there, takin' charge of the damned town. A bird named Sunny Jim Sweet seemed mad as hell 'bout somethin' an' was right gratifyin' to talk to. He's out there in the bunch an' says he's come to see yore Jubilee Bill, alias Mr. Mark Powell, hung to a limb. It seems that Jubilee musta knocked some of his teeth out.

"Well, anyhow," he turned, hands on his

hips, "here we are. The boys are roundin' up. I took a long chance, comin' into another man's territory, but there ain't no particular law ag'in' it. What's new?"

Down the canyon three hours later, dog-tired and sleepy, their faces dirty and wan, The Powder River Kid and Nanka Glover sat in their saddles watching relentless swarms of cowboys drive herds of stampeding sheep into Danger River.

The swift current caught the animals, whisking them away to the tunnel in the cliffs. There they shot out of sight, to come up on the other side of the cliff and go stampeding down the valley. Soon there was not a sheep left.

Fires were eating away at camp equipment, and now long lines of men were appearing, riding with prisoners tied in their saddles and bound across the pass for Lone Deer.

"Getting the sheep out of here like that," explained The Kid, lolling forward in his saddle, "was Pop's idea in the first place."

"It . . . it was a long time coming, Mr. Peter Clark." The girl spoke with a wan smile. "And . . . and the sheep will go on and on, clearing the valley, clearing everything until they're back to their own ranges. That land has come back to the cows. I . . . I hope," she lowered her eyes, "you and Pop won't go away."

"Pop will, after a time," The Kid grinned. "As for me, Nanka, I . . . I sure do like it here. As . . . as Pop'd say, I'm right down hawg wild about it."

Their horses eased closer together. The Kid's hand stole to one side, and Nanka Glover's took the same notion. The hands met, touched, fumbled for an instant, and closed upon each other. The fight they had gone through seemed far, far away.

THE PAY-OFF

by

CLEVE F. ADAMS

"Well, you're askin' for it, so take it!" said Wahl, as the roar of his .45's echoed the blast of Smoky's guns.

Smoky Storment Came To Little Gila Ridin' The Gun-Sign. The Town Killers Didn't Believe In Signs—Until Smoky Got Into Action

He was a stranger to Little Gila, this slim young fellow astride the great roan stallion. Yet Little Gila was not strange to him.

It looked just about as he'd pictured it from his brother Jed's letters: a dozen or so ramshackle buildings sprawled along the one dusty street; the sharp smell of sage brush tainted a little with the sour, sickish odor of stale liquor and fresh horse dung. Flies buzzed about the roan's sweat-stained flanks, and the late afternoon sun dipped toward the distant Tombstones as he dismounted stiffly, wearily, and anchored the stallion with trailing reins near the green-scummed water trough. He stretched long arms wide and yawned sleepily, giving the loungers plenty of time to note his arrival.

After that he clumped across the street, kicking up little clouds of powdery dust as he went, and pushed into the eating house which was run, according to the sign, by one Hop Lee.

The place was dim and deserted but for a lone waddy and the undersized Chinese who served him. The stranger leaned elbows on the counter, waited. Presently the Chinese pattered up.

"You Hop Lee?" queried the stranger,

tilting his tall beaver hat back on his head.

The yellow face became wooden, the almond eyes blank, inscrutable. "Me Hop Lee, aw light. You catchum wanna eat?"

"Mebbe. Mebbe not."

"Velly nice lamb chops, today. Velly plenty nice."

The waddy got up, headed for the door. "The Chink's lyin' like hell, pardner. Them ain't lamb chops. Them's mutton." He tossed a silver dollar to the counter, stared hard at the little yellow man, let his eyes flick carelessly over the stranger's face. He sauntered out, hitching at his gun belt as if it irked him.

Hop Lee said, "I think this velly bad town fo' you. Look plenty too damn' much like yo' blotheh Jed. You Smoky Sto'ment, heh?"

"Yeah, I'm Smoky. Took a long time for your message to reach me, Hop Lee. I've been kinda driftin' around some. But I'm here, and I'm askin' who killed my brother Jed."

"Pete Wahl smoke him, Smoky. Pete Wahl, he own Gold Dollah Saloon acloss stleet. Velly mad 'cause he no can find wheh Jed get gold. Ev'ybody mad at yo' blotheh. All but China boy, Hop Lee."

"Yeah," said Smoky. A fleeting grin touched his grim lips. "Yeah, Jed usta write me about you, Hop Lee. Well, I expect we'd better forget them lamb chops for a spell. I gotta see a man." He went out.

He felt curious eyes upon him as he crossed the street, but no one offered a greeting. Evidently an unfriendly town, Little Gila. Lamps were being lit along the way, the Tombstone range had at last swallowed the sun, and in the Gold Dollar a tinny piano was being banged by inexpert hands.

Smoky patted the great roan affectionately. "We better get you a bath, old son, and mebbe a bowl of oats, hunh?" He tossed the reins over the stallion's head, strode off down the dusty street to where a single lantern illuminated a crude livery stable sign. The roan followed, nibbling at his hip pockets.

The liveryman, a huge fellow with a drooping walrus mustache, stared. "Hell, you done give me a start, sonny. You look so danged much like . . . Say, you ain't no relation to Jed Storment, be ye?"

"Mebbe," said Smoky. "Then again, mebbe not. Depends on who I'm talkin' to, mostly. You a friend of Jed's?"

The big fellow stepped to the doors, glanced out cautiously. "Yep," he said, "yep, I reckon I *was* a friend o' his'n. 'Fore he got took bad with lead poisonin'. Old Jed had quite a bunch o' friends around Little Gila."

"I heard different, partner." Smoky's blue eyes grew suddenly hard, steely. "Yep, a little birdie told me that most folks in Little Gila just naturally hated Jed's guts."

"Lookee, young 'un, I don't aim to argue none at all, but Jed's friends warn't in no position to do much about it when . . . when Pete Wahl perforated him. Pete kinda runs this town, he do, when the sheriff's at the county seat. The deppity, he's one o' Pete's gang, and so . . .

"Jed had him a little spread out under them hills," he continued. "Ran himself two-th'ee hundred head and was doin' right well till he started bringin' in a poke o' dust once in a while. Folks got curiouser and curiouser about where that thar gold was comin' from, and they finally figgered that Jed was the one holdin' up the stages. Me, I never thought so."

"Why?"

"Fer one thing, Jed 'lowed to me that he'd found him a little pocket in one o' the gulches out his way."

"So yuh had to blab it all over town, hunh? And Pete Wahl and his gang bored Jed so they could cop his claim!"

"Now lookee, young 'un, they ain't no call to go a-flarin' off like that. I never

blabbed nothin' to nobody. Far as Jed's killin's consarned, he was took while playin' cyards with Pete Wahl and some o' the others. We found him with a gun in his hand, so accordin' to the deppity ever'thing was all open and above board. But me, I got a idea that Pete Wahl's gang knew Jed wasn't a-robbin' of the stages 'cause they was doin' it theirselves. And consequent, they mought have suspicioned whar he was gettin' his gold. On'y they ain't found out yet."

"An' who's runnin' the spread now?"

"Ain't no spread. Leastways, they ain't no cows. Somebody done run 'em off after Jed got took with . . ."

"Yeah, lead poisonin'. Well, old timer, take care of Hogan for me, will yuh? I reckon I'm gonna stay in Gila for a spell. If I should happen to stay here—uh—permanent, why I reckon you and Hop Lee can split whatever yuh get for Hogan."

He tugged at his hat, patted the stallion's rump. "Hogan's a top hand," he said gently. "So long, old timer."

"Lookee here, young 'un, Little Gila's two-gun territory. You're only packin' one, I see, an' it 'pears to me like yuh pack that one kinda awkward like. I'd—well, I wouldn't go foolin' around Pete Wahl if I was you."

"Me," said Smoky, "me, I don't fool—much! Adios." He went out.

The Gold Dollar was flourishing. They started their fun early in Little Gila. Smoky came in quietly, blue eyes taking in the garish lights, the painted girls and the groups of hard-bitten men about the faro and roulette layouts. There were three or four men at the long bar. One of them wore a deputy's star on his flapping vest.

Smoky took off his hat, placed it beside him on the bar, ordered a drink. In the mirror he could see furtive eyes appraising him. A hush descended on the room, was dispelled instantly as everyone began to talk at once. The man with the star moved down to Smoky's side.

"An' who might you be, stranger?"

Smoky stared at him. "You know who I am," he said easily. "I look enough like Jed Storment to be his twin. So yuh can call me Smoky and let it go at that. What's your handle, deputy?"

"Daingerfield. And I'm warnin' yuh, little boy, that if you're figgerin' on takin' up for Jed yuh better keep on driftin'. This is a bad town for strangers. It's worse for the brother of a . . ."

"I wouldn't say it, was I you."

"I am sayin' it. Jed Storment was a dirty thief!" His hands slapped leather, started up.

A second man stumbled against Smoky, blocked the single gun on his leg. And just as the deputy's iron cleared its holster Smoky's hat belched flame. Once. Daingerfield dropped. Gun in hand, Smoky kicked the stumbler in the face, stood there bareheaded, quiet.

"Any more?" he queried. "Anybody else think I oughta be driftin'?"

"Me," said a hard voice behind him. A gun muzzle tickled his neck. "Yep, you oughta be driftin' "—a hoarse chuckle—"driftin' where yore brother done drifted. I think I'm gonna help yuh on yore way." A hammer clicked back.

And Smoky fired over his shoulder. Flame scorched his cheek; the blast of his own gun deafened him. But the pressure of that other gun on his neck was gone. He swiveled, dropped to his haunches, leaned back against the bar surveying the room. It was suddenly very quiet.

"Anybody else?" Smoky's voice sounded muffled, even to himself. His blue eyes were a little cloudy. "Anybody here achin' to hurry me along the trail?"

There was no answer. It seemed like a long time before three punchers got up from a poker table, came over and stopped beside the fallen men. Smoky stood up, caught the flash of a bottle as the bartender

raised it high, ducked again just in time to avoid being brained. The bottle crashed on the edge of the bar.

"Daingerfield ain't dead yet," said one of the punchers. "But the other one got it straight between the eyes." He grinned suddenly and Smoky recognized him as the waddy from Hop Lee's. "Them mutton chops musta done somethin' to yuh, pardner. Wish to hell they'd do as much for me. Yuh bored Hank over your shoulder."

"Yeah," said Smoky. "Well, folks, I hate to disturb the peace thisaway, but it kinda seems yuh don't like us Storments. Mebbe one of yuh could point out this here Pete Wahl to me, hunh? It's time for the pay-off."

"Pete ain't around right now," grunted the bartender. "Lucky fer yuh he ain't. Yuh just dropped two o' his best friends and he'd sure like to meet yuh."

"I'll be in town," said Smoky. "Tell him what I said about the pay-off. Tell him to look me up."

Eyes watchful, he backed slowly to the bat-wing doors. "I'll settle for that drink later, old timer. After I've had it." He was outside.

There were people in the street now, people attracted by the sound of the shots. Keeping to the shadows, Smoky went swiftly, silently along the raised board walk, descended to the street and headed for the livery stable. Walrus-mustache looked relieved.

"Kinda feared them thar slugs was a-buried in yore hide, young 'un. You'll be high-tailin' it outa town now?"

"Nope." Smoky sighted his saddle and roll atop a feed bin, loosed the roll and changed gun belts. The new one had two holsters. He filled them with the .45's from his hat and the discarded belt. "The hat trick," he said, "is like a shirt gun . . . necessary at times, old timer, when you don't know what you're headin' into. Yep, I reckon I'd be plumb dead if it wasn't for my hat."

"Yuh mean more'n one of 'em tried to taken yuh? An' yuh beat 'em to it?"

"Yuh might say. Daingerfield is right sick and one o' his helpers is gettin' cold. And another one, a hombre that's got a bad habit o' stumbling at the wrong time . . . well, he's gonna hafta eat mush for a spell. I done kicked all his teeth out."

"Glory be! You ain't much like your brother Jed, young 'un. Jed, he war right peaceable."

"Which is why, old timer, I'm kinda figurin' on evenin' the score. Yuh see, knowin' Jed, I'm damn' sure he never started the fight."

Smoky tugged his hat low over his eyes, went out into the night. A rider passed him, going toward the Gold Dollar; a rider with a star on his vest. Smoky went on, entered Hop Lee's. More customers now. Hop Lee was busy.

Smoky found a seat at the back, a vantage point from which he could view the entrance. Presently Hop Lee came to his side.

"Who," Smoky inquired, "was the waddy said your lamb chops was no good?"

"Him Jo-Jo Long. One time he wuk fo' yo' blotheh. Otheh man wuk too, but him dead. Pete Wahl no likee him."

"Anybody Pete Wahl don't like just ups and dies, hunh? Looks bad for me, don't it? 'Cause I expect Pete is gonna be downright displeased with me, Hop Lee. Well, shovel out some ham and eggs."

Watchful eyes on the door, he waited. No one in the place paid him the slightest attention, but he was expecting visitors. The man with the star, surely. His ham and eggs came and he ate quietly, almost absently, without hurry.

The eating-house had almost emptied when the screen door opened and the man with the star came in. The star said SHERIFF. And the face above it was seamed, weathered mahogany. Jutting, craggy brows shadowed eyes that were very

hard, very direct. But the sheriff's hands hung straight down, well away from his guns. He came over, sat at the counter beside Smoky.

"Hear you're a brother o' Jed Storment."

"Yep."

"Smokin' deputy sheriffs is bad business . . . Smoky."

"Havin' deputies like him is worse."

The sheriff's mouth tightened. "I reckon," he said, "that you better be comin' along with me, Smoky Storment." His right arm scarcely seemed to move, yet Smoky felt a gun muzzle buried in his ribs.

"Yuh see," the sheriff continued, "Daingerfield and the rest allus claimed it was yore brother stickin' up the stages and I couldn't prove no different. An' another funny thing is that as soon as you got in this territory . . . well, last night the Big Gila stage was took."

"Meanin' I did it?"

"Meanin' you might have." The gun jabbed a little harder now. The sheriff's left hand snaked down, jerked Smoky's guns, tossed them across the counter to Hop Lee.

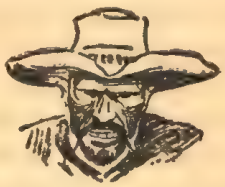
"I ain't got room in my pockets right now, Hop, so you can take care o' them irons fer me." He got up slowly. "Okay, Smoky, let's go."

The little jail office was jammed with an old oak desk, a rowel-scarred table and odds and ends of decrepit chairs and benches. A single hanging lamp cast a feeble glow over the collection. Sheriff O'Hara motioned Smoky to a seat.

"You don't act so hard, Smoky. I had a notion I was gonna have trouble corrallin' yuh."

"Me," Smoky grinned crookedly, "me, I ain't hard. It's this damn' town of yours that's hard. I didn't even get a chance to down a drink over at the Gold Dollar before Daingerfield and a coupla others was pawin' my frame. But don't let my mild blue eye fool yuh, O'Hara. Nobody ever relieved me o' my .45's yet 'thout I wanted 'em to. Yuh see, I heard this town wasn't really tough only when you was away, so I figured mebbe you was straight."

O'Hara's eyes glinted dangerously. "You're damned right I'm straight! Straighter'n others I could spit on! Where'd



yuh cache the loot from the Big Gila stage? I already been through your saddle roll and it ain't there."

"No," said Smoky, "it ain't there 'cause it never was there. I never pulled that stick-up, an' I got a hunch you know it. An' while we're on the subject of bein' straight, what happened to my brother's personal belongin's—the stuff he had in his pockets? How come I wasn't notified of his death? How come yuh let somebody rustle his cows? What the hell kind of a razzle-dazzle are yuh runnin' in this county, anyway?"

"You . . . you wasn't notified?"

"Nary a notice!"

"But Daingerfield said he'd written you! Said he sent on your brother's tack, too. An' put a coupla hands out on the spread to watch things till you got here."

"And one o' the hands was killed, hunh? Defendin' them pore little cows! And the other one probably escaped . . . to turn up later as a pal o' Daingerfield and Pete Wahl. Looks like this end o' your county needs a house-cleanin', Sheriff."

"An' you're electin' yourself to do it, eh? Well, mebbe I'd consider lettin' yuh, if I was sure yuh wasn't a thief like yore . . ."

The dart of Smoky's hand was swifter than the strike of a sidewinder. The sheriff's .44 was on the table before him

but he never touched it. Smoky's hat fanned down across O'Hara's eyes, his left hand got the gun. He stood there, balancing it easily.

"Yore deputy got drilled right after he made a like remark about Jed. Mebbe you'd better let me do the talkin', Sheriff. Then yuh won't get into no trouble."

O'Hara made a half-hearted movement toward his left thigh, changed his mind. "You're dealin'," he said grimly.

"From the top o' the deck, O'Hara. The way the Storments always deal."

Smoky's left hand fumbled at a shirt pocket, came out with a crumpled letter. "I reckon that'll explain where Jed was gettin' the dust instead of where you thought he was gettin' it. And where Pete Wahl *claimed* he was gettin' it."

"Drop that gun, hombre!" The voice came from a side window. Smoky couldn't even see the owner. He let his gun thud to the floor, swiveled slowly.

The man outside the open window grinned, showing even white teeth in a broad dark face. "You're lookin'," he said, "at none other than ol' Pete Wahl hisself. I hear you been havin' a little argument in my place and that yuh left word fer me to look you up. So here I am."

Sheriff O'Hara had his second gun out now. He said, "Okay, Pete, I got him covered." He came around the table, kicked Smoky's fallen .45 away, stooped and picked it up.

"Yeah," said Wahl, "you got him covered. And I got *you* covered, Sheriff. Don't move!"

Faces appeared in the front window, then in the one door. After that the little office became crowded. Wahl, climbing in through the side window, knocked O'Hara's gun down. Two other men pinioned Smoky's arms. Another emptied the sheriff's holster.

"The boys seem to think this hombre needs lynchin', Sheriff. 'Course, I'm all for law and order myself, but yuh see how it is." Wahl leered, and continued:

"Little Gila just nacher'ly hates to have a stranger come bustin' in, a-killin' and a-robbin' of our citizens. Besides, you wasn't actin' like yuh took your deppity's murder to heart, so . . ."

"Daingerfield is dead?"

"Plenty. An' his dyin' words was to string this dirty so-and-so up to the nearest cottonwood."

"And I say you're not stringing him up!"

A gun descended on the sheriff's unprotected head. He dropped without a sound. Smoky's right foot lashed out in a vicious kick at the man in front of him. The fellow yowled.

But the two holding Smoky's arms were too much for him. A gun butt caught him behind the ear as he struggled. Another. He went down. Lights swirled before his eyes. Somebody kicked him, hard. The lights stopped swirling. Smoky Storment was out.

After a long, long time he became aware of the rumble of voices. He opened his eyes cautiously. Light assailed them. He closed them again to shut out the unbearable ache, lay there supine. His wrists were tied behind him, his ankles lashed together. Exploring fingers felt a splintery floor beneath his back. And still the voices rumbled on.

One of them sounded like Pete Wahl's:

"You fools might have killed him and I don't want him killed, yuh hear me? Not yet, anyway. Not till I can beat somethin' outa him I wanta know."

Smoky opened his eyes again. It was better this time. He could see a little. Yes, it was Pete Wahl doing the talking. And there was the puncher Hop Lee had said worked for Smoky's brother Jed. And the fellow Smoky had kicked in the face. This one wasn't saying much; his lips were too cut and swollen.

Over beyond the table Smoky could see

the boots of two others, likely the two coyotes who'd held him back there in the sheriff's office. He wondered about O'Hara a little, became interested once more in the talk above him.

Pete Wahl said, "Hell, I was listenin' at the window, wasn't I? When the dumb kid tells O'Hara about the letter? I heard him say right out that Jed's scrawl would prove where all that gold dust was comin' from.

"But hell's fire, when I get the damn' thing it don't say a word 'cept that Jed Storment had found a gulch with free gold in it. An' we knew that already. Leastways"—he winked broadly—"leastways we knew damn' well it wasn't him robbin' the stages."

"Yeah, an' yuh had to smoke Jed before we found out which gulch. Smart, you are!"

Wahl scowled. "Some o' these days, Lefty, you're gonna talk too much with your mouth. And when yuh do I'm gonna fill it plumb full o' lead!"

He strode over to Smoky's side, nudged him with a heavy foot. "We'll make the kid talk instead o' his brother. I got a hunch Jed might've wrote him about the location."

Smoky lay still. Jed had written him about the location, but he'd be damned if Pete Wahl would ever find it out. He felt a sudden draft creep along the floor as one of the men opened the door, looked out.

"The rest o' the lynchin' party oughta be ketchin' up with us pretty soon, Pete."

Wahl said, "Yeah, yuh better fetch in a bucket o' water, Mesquite. We'll see what makes this here Smoky tick. Time he was wakin' up, anyway."

The man went out, closed the door behind him. There came the sound of a scuffle, an agonized curse, a thump as of a heavy body falling. A sudden rush of feet smothered Smoky's prone figure.

"Somebody got Mesquite!"

"Knifed, by God! Spread out, men. We'll hafta get him or the whole damned town'll be down around our ears!"

Smoky was left in sole possession of the shack. But not for long. Presently the door creaked open a little. There was the slither of soft-shod feet. And Hop Lee, very pleased with himself from felt-soled sandals to inky queue, knelt beside him. There was a knife in his hand.

"Me fix 'um," Hop grinned. "Me fix 'um good, heh?"

"I b'lieve yuh," Smoky chuckled, and sat up as the ropes parted. He was stiff and sore; his head ached like the very devil, but he was free. "I don't suppose yuh happened to bring my guns, too?"

"Me bring 'um," said Hop Lee cheerfully. He produced the two .45's from his blouse. "So we betteh get to hell out befo' they come back, heh?"

Smoky stood up. "We can try it, old timer, but I done think we're too late to do much runnin'. They're back!"

Clumping boots approaching on the run attested the fact that they were indeed back. A swift blow from one of his guns shattered the lamp. The shack was plunged into darkness. There was the mutter of surprised voices from without. And then a concerted rush hit the door.

Smoky's guns blazed. Other blazed at him. He dropped to the floor, wriggled forward on his belly. Feet trampled him. He fired straight up, rolled over as a body toppled on him. Using the body as a shield he emptied his guns at wavering, twisting shadows. A curse, as another man came down. And a ricocheting slug seemed to lift the roof right off Smoky's head.

There were lights again. Lanterns, this time. Sheriff O'Hara's broad face seemed to be floating in the acrid haze of black powder smoke. Smoky rolled to his feet, grinned foolishly at the ring of men

around him. And then he saw Hop Lee. The little Chinese was huddled on the floor. Blood seeped from a wound in his scalp.

Smoky dropped to his knees, turned the little fellow over. Hop opened his eyes. " 'S'malla you, Smoky? You all blood!" He sat up, sloe-black eyes surveying the scene about him without emotion. One yellowed hand crept up, explored the gash in his own head. "Cleased, by God!" he said. And fainted.

O'hara said grimly, "I thought they were gonna lynch you." His hard eyes stared from Smoky to the still forms on the floor, came back to rest on the reviving Hop Lee.

"There's another very bad man outside," said Smoky. "In case you missed him. Name of Mesquite. How come you arrived on the scene, O'Hara?"

The sheriff waved at the men about him. "Why, these is some o' the neck-tie party that wasn't saddled up like Pete Wahl's boys. I kinda came to life 'fore they got away and turned the lynchin' bee into a rescue. What was Pete gonna do to yuh?"

"He was gonna try to tease some information outa me, O'Hara. Pete wanted to know right bad where Jed's dust came from. He kinda hinted that he knew Jed wasn't gettin' it from the stages 'cause Pete himself was workin' that end."

O'Hara cursed. "All right, men, Pete Wahl and the other two are ridin' west. We're high-tailin' after 'em!"

"Me," said Smoky, "me, I got no horse, so I expect I'm headin' east. Besides, I gotta get ol' Hop Lee patched up."

His words were lost in the bustle of a hurried departure. Presently he and Hop Lee were left alone, standing beside the dusty trail, listening to the diminishing hoofbeats of the sheriff's posse.

"Come on, yuh yella heathen," Smoky urged. "We got business in town."

They trudged off toward the distant glimmering lights which marked Little Gila. After a time, when he'd reloaded his guns and they'd covered better than half the distance to town, Smoky reached out a tentative hand, patted a black-clad shoulder.

"You're white, Hop Lee," he muttered embarrassedly. "I expect I owe yuh plenty for droppin' in like yuh did. Which reminds me, how come yuh did drop in?"

"Me," said Hop Lee, trying to ape Smoky's style, "me, I keep eyes open, heh? Long time I know 'bout Pete Wahl shack on hidden tlail. I tag 'long behin' lynch pahty, heh?"

Smoky grinned. "Yeah, you must have, at that. Only they had broncs and you was afoot, hunh? Yuh know, old timer, I kinda like you. Fact is, I know damn' well I like yuh!"

"Me likee you, Smoky," said the little man gravely. "Me likee yo' blotheh, me likee you. You savvy?"

"Yes," said Smoky. "I savvy, Hop Lee." They entered Little Gila's one street. "That slug kinda ripped your queue loose, old timer. Yuh better get a sawbones to stitch it back on. Me, I gotta see a man."

He left Hop Lee flat, departed at a trot into the deep shadows behind a row of buildings.

And came to the rear of the Gold Dollar. A horse was tethered there, a horse whose lathered flanks still heaved. Smoky loosed the cinch strap but left the saddle on. After that he went around the building, pushed through the bat-wing doors.

Apparently everyone was not away. The dealers were still at their tables, the tinny piano still tinkled, and two maudlin couples were trying to dance on the sawdust-covered floor. Behind the bar the bald-headed bartender was watching Pete Wahl clean the till.

Smoky said, "I kinda thought you might be needin' money on your travels, Pete. So I came back, too."

Wahl whirled. "You would!" he grated. "Well, you're askin' for it—so take it!" His hands came up filled with .45's.

Their roar echoed the blast of Smoky's guns. Smoky's hat was flung from his head. Another slug nicked his ear. He dived forward, rose halfway down the bar. The barkeep's bald head was all he could see. Wahl was gone. One of the drunks threw a bottle. It crashed at Smoky's side.

There was another shot and little slivers kicked into his face. Wahl came up at the far end of the bar, snapped two harmless slugs in Smoky's general direction, ran for the back door. And Smoky plugged him in the leg.

Wahl staggered, went to his knees, got up and disappeared through the door. Smoky went after him. A slug from behind tore off one of his heels. He kept on going, emerged just in time to see the saddle come off in Wahl's hands.

"All right, Pete, this is the pay-off. I'm takin' yuh."

"Like hell!" One of Wahl's guns jerked up, then the other. And Smoky let him have it, straight between the eyes.

"For Jed," he said softly as Wahl dropped. "At that, yuh had a better chance than yuh gave old Jed."

He holstered his guns, turned back into the Gold Dollar. The bald-headed barkeep, in the act of jerking trigger, suddenly thought better of it. He dropped his gun as if it were hot, and the rosy hue of his moon face turned ashen.

"I'll pay for that drink now," said Smoky. "If you'll set the bottle out."

SHADIN'

By S. Omar Barker

When you're out on mountain circle, an' you've rode till 'way past noon,
An' your middle's kinder ganted, for you've chawed your last dried prune,
An' you hit a little grassy park, your pony tired as hell,
Then's the time to pull the saddle off an' graze him for a spell.

So you pick you out the shadow of a spruce tree on the glade,
An' you stretch out 'mongst the bluebells to enjoy a little shade.
While your pony takes a gruntin' roll to scratch his sweaty back,
You can hear an' ol' steer beller somewheres back upon your track,
An' you know jest why he's bawlin', for you've roped an' hawged him down,
An' some other wildies like him for the boss to ship to town.

But it ain't them steers you think of, shadin' here a little while,
Where the bluebells are the color of a pair of eyes whose smile
Is as sweet as mountain flowers with the dawn dew freshly wet,
An' you dream of lips more sweetsome than the fragrant mignonette.

'Course you're grimed an' tired an' sweaty, an' your muscles kinder ache,
For it's man-work ropin' wildies—but you're sweatin' for a stake,
An' it ain't to spend for likker nor pirootin' with the bunch—
It's to build a little cabin, for you've kinder got a hunch
That the blue-eyed gal will share it, an' inside its sunny door
One ol' circle ridin' cowhand won't be lonesome any more . . .

Mighty nice to lay here shadin', with the bluebells brewin' dreams,
Kinder lazy-dazy schemin' all your love-embroidered schemes,
But your pony's done got rested, so you'd better up an' scoot,
'Cause unless you make 'em *real*, shadin' dreams ain't worth a hoot!

BRISTLE-CHEST CHESTER

A BOOSTY PECKLEBERRY LAUGH RIOT

By

S. OMAR BARKER

"Son," said Mr. Embustero (Boosty) Peckleberry, addressing the new hand named Lufe, "I wisht you'd glance out the winder an' see what's scratchin' around in the ends of my mustache. Feels like a chicken frum here. If it's a hen makin' her a nest, jest let 'er lay."

Lufe looked out obligingly to where old Boosty's hosstails hung over the sill to the ground for an airing.

"It's a rooster," he reported. "Reminds me—"

"Never mind gittin' reminded, son. Jest shoo that dang *gallo* outa my hosstails 'fore he tangles his spurs in 'em an' yanks my lips off. Ain't it hell the way the ol' open range has tightened up to where a man can't even hang his whiskers out to dry but what there's chickens into 'em?"

"Reminds me of my ol' Uncle Zeke. He—"

"Shucks," put in Bran Mash Mullens, turning down a page corner at the lingerie section of the catalogue so it would be easy to find again, "you speak as if you thought them hosstails was man-hair, Boosty. They ain't nothin' to compare with the whiskers them ol' pioneer Tehanners used to raise when I was a catfishin' kid in Texas. Two, three them ol' whisk-

erinos used to kinder weave their whiskers together into a net an' seine a hunderd catfish out the Brazos with it at one sweep, jest by noddin' their chins. An'—"

"My Uncle Zeke, he—"

"You cain't judge a man by his face hair, no ways," broke in Biff Wilkins, squirting a drop of white mule into a stuck key of his mouth harp to loosen it up. "Where you got to look, you got to look on his chist. I knowed a feller up on the Picketwire—'He-Man Harry,' they called him—used to have to sleep up on the windmill endurin' warm weather. Yessir, shore as it come summer, he had to have that windmill fannin' a breeze through the hair on his chist or he'd smother."

"You take, now, my Uncle Zeke, his chest hair—"

"Suckwater an' sogtail!" snorted Banty McGinnis, cracking a prune seed in the palm of his hand with a bootheel and munching the kernel. "You cain't no more judge an ol' he-curly wolf by whether he's bristle-faced an' woolly-boozemed than you can a hawg by his grunt!"

"Speakin' of hawgs, my ol' Uncle Zeke—"

"Well," said Mr. Boosty Peckleberry judiciously, hauling his mustaches in from the chill of the evening air and coiling them neatly over his ears, "you can—an' you cain't. It kinder depends. But you know what the Good Book relates about ol' Samson goin' grassy in his muscles after Deliler helt him down an' let them Filly Steens run the mowin' machine over him. Seem like the Lord wouldn't of lodged this here whisker an' chest hair hanker so heavy an' universal in the boozems of most all two-footed human critters of the male persuasion, if'n they wasn't somethin' to it.

"Myself, personal, I allus allowed a man ort to give some attention to the growin' of whiskers from about the age when he begins swallerin' the juice, right on up to when he's too feeble to spit over the coffee pot. But I never taken it to heart like a boy I knowed back when us ol' buck-skinners wore hoss shoes fer ear rings an' the West was kinder wild."

Old Boosty held a plug of chawin' to the fire on the point of a bowie knife till the juice began to sizzle out, then popped it into his mouth and tongue-choused it into his cheek.

I reckon you yearlin's (he continued) ain't never seen no shore-'nough heer-sootical, hairy-faced, bristle-boozemed, he-men curly wolves to speak of. Lemme relate you jest a few of the facks about this here waddy I mentioned.

Like as not you've heerd tell of him as Bristle-Chest Chester, though some called him Half-a-Mile Harry. But neither one of them is the handle he was borned an' raised under, an' which he was still a-sufferin' with the first time me an' ol' Jim Bridger met up with him, roustaboutin' on a Rockin' R roundup.

That was the year Jim Bridger summered southwards to git away frum them guvmint Injun agents up North always pesterin' him to cut his hair, take a bath an' quit practicin' polygamy.

"Wagh!" says ol' Jim. "What the hell they mean 'practicin'? An' as fer the bath—hell, I taken a bath four year ago an' like to drownt ever' flea I got! Wagh! Don't they know thet all water is good fer is to tell whichaway's downhill?"

So he jest bit off the ears of them two Injun wives of his so he could tell 'em from the other squaws when he got back, an' high-tailed it down here to New Mexico. I had a good guvmint job my own self that summer, makin' mirages for the immigrants, so ol' Jim jest throwed in with me. I tell ye, boys, us two was the dangedest pair of mule-ridin' mirage wranglers that ever fooled a freighter.

But I was tellin' you 'bout this Chester. We gigged our jassacks up to Rockin' R waggin one day when it was so hot that

the horny toads come frum miles around to set by the coosie's cookin' fire to cool off, an' there, wrastlin' down calves right out in the sun was this waddy I speak of, with his shirt buttoned shut right up to the top hole.

Lots of the other hands had their shirts plumb off, an' them that didn't had 'em flappin' open plumb down to the wishbone, exposin' their hairy briskits to the breeze, so to speak. But this here waddy's shirttail wasn't even out fer ventilation.

Gents, it was a hottish day. This lad's face was mighty nigh sunbroiled fer lack of whiskers to shade it, an' the sweat was streamin' down his pants legs to where he couldn't hardly take a step without trompin' on a lizard. Follerin' him around fer a drink, they was.

When we rode up, this laddyboy was jest flankin' down a yearlin'. I could see right off that he was right smart of a man, because the way he throwed that calf for the brandin', he flopped it down so hard its tongue popped out a good fifteen an' a half inches from its mouth, and right away this cowboy stepped on it. Did any you young squirts ever witness a dogie tryin' to git up, with a cowboy standin' on its tongue? It beats holdin' 'em tail-through-the-crotch like swallerin' beats spittin' aginst the wind.

You know ol' Jim Bridger was one woolly booger, one of the hairiest gents of a mighty hairy era. I wasn't no peeled onion my own self. Well, sir, when that smooth-faced waddy looked up an' observed us two woolly boogers settin' on our jassacks, his eyes bugged out to where you could of wrote Merry Christmas on the whites.

"Howdy," I says.

But he jest stood there, spellbound with admiration. You know how a little ol' eight months dogie sometimes gazes at a bulge-necked bull as he surges along the trail, bellerin' bass an' swingin' his lordly head? Well, sir, that's jest the way this waddy gazed at ol' Jim Bridger.

"Jee-zoopers!" he gasps, an' it ain't hard to figger what he's takin' note of so admirin'ly. It's the way ol' Jim is wooled up with hair, from his briskit right on up apast the wart on his nose an' on over his head, plumb to the end of them sixteen inch curly locks danglin' down his back.

"Jee-zoopers yer own self, son," I says. "It ain't no scabs off'n *my* heel, but ain't it kinder warm with your shirt buttoned up thataway?"

"Yes," he says, in a low quavery voice, kinder like a bashful country gal oilin' up her pappy's shotgun, with modist, downcast eyes. "Yes, it is. But if I wear it open, why—why—"

"He's afeerd," offers Prune-Wart Pete, that's handlin' the irons, "we'll see he ain't got no hair on his chist."

"Wagh!" grunts ol' Jim Bridger. "Is that the facks, young feller?"

"Them," admits the boy, pickin' up the branded calf by the tongue, whirlin' it around his head an' throwin' it back into the herd, "is the facks. Sometimes it might' near to busts me down, jest to think of it. An' no whiskers, either, to speak of. I wisht I knowed what to do about it."

I shaken my head an' kinder clucked to let him know I was shore right sorry for him.

"Son," I says, "what's yore name?"

Well sir, gents, the tears welt up in his eyes when I ask him that, dimmin' his vision to where the next calf tongue he went to step on, he missed it an' stepped on one of them thirsty lizards instid. Never even noticed when it bit him. But shamed as he was, he had the guts to answer me honist and true.

"Hennery Perceval Chauncey Chester," he confesses. "Or anyways that's all I kin remember of it."

"Wagh!" snorts Jim Bridger. "How you expect chest hair to sprout in the shade of a name like that?"

"Yes," I seconds him, "the power of

siggestion, the infloonce of mind over matter ain't nothin' to be snooze at. First thing you got to do, you got to git you a more heersutical handle. Throw all them names in the gully ixcept the first an' last, change the Hennery to Harry, pernounced Hairy, an' call yerself Harry Chester!

"If you'll jest hold still while I splash a little of this here double strength mirage-maker, otherwise knowed as moonshine, over yer prow . . . I hereby christen thee 'Harry Chester,' so be it, amen an' the devil take the hindmost! Now then, open up that shirt an' watch the bristles sprout!"

Now accordin' to common sense an' the facks of science, that ort to of worked. But seem like it never. When me an' Jim Bridger come back by a coupla weeks later, havin' jaunted over into Texas to chouse some Tonkaway Injuns that was stealin' the ticks offa cattle to play marbles with, why there was pore Chester sweatin' away with his shirt buttoned up the same as before.

When we taken him to one side to inquire about the sproutin' prospects, he plumb busts down. Says his boozem is still as bare as a scraped hawg, barrin' a little bitsy circle of fuzz in the general vicinity of them areas that nature ain't never found no use for on a white man. On Injuns, o' course, shirtless like they are, they make right suitable targits to shoot at.

Seem like re-namin' the boy hadn't done no good to speak of. In fack, the worry is gittin' him down to where he sometimes is so weak, floppin' a calf, that it don't hardly hit the ground hard enough to bounce.

Now I've always helt to the notion that there ain't no sense runnin' your tail off chasin' a rabbit if you kin ketch a prairie dog easier, or in other words, take things as they come in this life, 'specially if you cain't help it, because there ain't but one day between tomorrow an' yestiddy anyways.

"Son," I consoles him, "they's other things in life besides briskit bristles an' whiskers. After all, you know, it's money makes the mare go."

Dawg me fer a wolf, I don't no more than git it said than a look of hope smears over the boy's face. Then, with a whoop of joy, he takes out like the heel flies had him. In less time than it takes to organize a spittin' that waddy had run apast the herd an' disappeared into a fringe of timber borderin' Bee-Buzz Crick a good three mile away.

Y'know them ants jest purt near to ruint him before we knowed they had him. What say? Shore I said ants. Have I got to draw you a pitcher of ever'thing? What Chester had done, he'd taken out to find him a bee tree.

The first 'un he opened turned out to be hornits, an' they stang him up right smart, him bein' so hairless thataway. But he run on an' found a honey tree an' got hisself stang some more a-robbin' it, but manidged to smear hisself all over with honey, 'bout an inch deep most places, but a coupla inches on chin an' chest.

So the next we seen of him was a coupla evenin's later he come foggin' in with an' ol' she bear right at his tail, gainin' ever' jump. Now I misdoubt if this ol' she bear had ever incountered an animated honey tree before, but most bears is free-thinkers as well as free-stinkers, an' they shore do like honey, so she taken right after him.

Would of ketched him, too, for her ol' red tongue was lappin' the honeyfied seat of Chester's britches ever' jump, but when Chester seen he was gittin' back amongst friends he kinder regained his courage, grabbed that ol' she bear's tongue an' yanked her inside out. Natcherly that left her headin' the other way an' before she could git her bearin's again, Chester loped on into camp.

"Well," he says, glancin' back at that unshucked bruin, "I reckon I ain't the only

critter around here now with the hair side in."

Chester was shore one sweet mess. I had to stand guard with a neck-yoke all endurin' supper to keep them cowboys frum soppin' their biskits on him. But he wouldn't allow to have it rubbed off on no account. He bedded down, honey-coated like he was, an' the next mornin' he was gone.

'Pears like a herd of them scissor-beaked, fire-tailed ants had trailed him by the drippin's an' plumb dragged him off. I don't know if we'd ever of found him, only along towards noon we heard the cook hollerin' fer help an' when we loped in, dang if there wasn't a platoon of them ants unboltin' the wagon tongue.

Seem like they'd got stuck with ol' Chester down in a gully an' come back after the wagon tongue to pry him out with. So we choused 'em off, follered 'em, an' found pore Chester. Them ants shore had him. They'd done licked up all the loose honey an' was scrapin' the dish, so to speak.

"You danged idjit!" I says. "When you felt 'em gnawin' you, whyn't you holler fer help?"

"Well," he says, "I did after I wokened up, but they'd done drug me quite a piece by then, an' I reckon you never heard me. I had to quit hollerin', though, because ever' time I let out a squawl that ol' king ant would spit in my face, an' if you know how ant spit stinks, why—"

I busted in to ask him how come he was so long wakin' up, an' he claims he was havin' such a beautiful dream he kinder hated to. Seem like ever' time them ants bit him he dreamed it was the prickle of hair a-sproutin'.

"What the hell was the idee of smearin' yourself up thisaway in the first place?" I ask him.

Well, sir, seem like when I'd said "money makes the mare go," he'd thought I said "honey makes the hair grow," an' acted accordin'. Proving that a man with a hare-lip pernounciation orta go easy on advice.

So we taken him back to the wagon an' kinder looked him over.

"Too bad we ain't got a sack of hair

seed to sow on him right now," offers Prune-Wart Pete, "for he's shore plowed up good."

But Chester says he'd done looked through ever' cattylog in the cow country but couldn't find hair seed listed nowheres.

Well, some of us helt that chest hair didn't come from seed anyhow, but jest growed natcheral, like cuckleburrs, or not at all. Ol' Jim Bridger allowed that if a man was borned a hairless sissy there wasn't nothin' you could do about it, less'n you'd tie a coupla dead dogs to his neck an' throw him in the river. An' Curly Lawthorne says that honey treatment is O. K. as fur as it goes, but you got to mix onion juice with it for strength to draw the hairlits through the skin.

But the upshoot was that Chester went back to work in a few days with his shirt buttoned up to the collar, beardless an' chest-hairless as ever. Mighty sad, but he hadn't give up.

"Boosty," he said as he bid me an' Jim Bridger goodbye, "you reckon them two gents could help me?"

What he'd handed me, it was a clipping from a newspaper, showing a couple of well-whiskered gents gazin' solemnly at each other acrost a coughdrop. Seem like the one on the left was named Smith an' the one on the right Smith. An' if their

coughdrops was anything like as vigorous as their whiskers, they'd cure a laughin' hyena of the giggles.

But he didn't have no pitcher showin' the heersutical situation on their boozems, but I promised that if ever I crossed trails with them Smith Brothers, I'd shore ask 'em how it was on their briskits.

With that, me an' ol' Jim pulled out an' left him gazin' mighty sorrowful at our hosstails trailin' out in the breeze.

P-ftooee . . . Y'know, gents the more I roominated about that pore cowboy with his heart bowed down by weight of its woe, all for the lack of a few bristles, the more I felt like somebody orta do something about it.

"Jim," I says, terbaccer-juicin' the mirage we was buildin' to give it kinder of a natcheral delicate brown color, "you take a man goin' around with his heart as heavy as a wheelbarrow full of fertilizer thataway, sooner or later it'll pull him down to where he's ackshurly swaybacked. Jim, I'll betcha them Smith Brothers could help that boy, an' I'm goin' to git 'em out here."

"You an' who else?" grunts Bridger.

"Me an' ol' Andy Jackson," I says. "Last I heard, Andy was president of this here land of the he an' home of the hairy, an' everwhen ol' Andy hollers, the hawgs jump through the fence. I'm goin' to write him a letter."

An' I done so, saying: "DEAR ANDY: SEND THEM SMITH BOYS OUT HERE WITH A LOAD OF COUGHDROPS, WILL YOU? THE DUST OF THESE HERE IMMIGRANT WAGGINS IS GIVIN' THE BUFFALO THE TIZICK."

An' Andy writ back: "DEAR COUSIN BOOSTY: DONE DONE IT. THEY WANT A FEW BUCKITS OF OZONE TO PUT IN THEIR CANDY. TELL ALL THE BOYS TO BE KEERFUL AN' NOT SHOOT 'EM FER BUFFALO. YOURS TILL THE ALLIGATORS TURNS PINK. ANDY."

Well, shore-'nough they had. Not the alligators, I mean—the Smith Brothers, Not turned pink, I mean—come West.

Now, the West was a mighty big country to find a man in, them days, even with whisker drag to trail 'em by. But I never wasted no time rampsin' around lookin' for 'em.

Nossir. I jest mixed cuckleberries with my chawin' to where they tickled my epigalootis an' set me to coughin'. Believe it or go suck aigs, I coughed to where them Smith Brothers heerd me clean up on Montaner, an' they dropped their ozone buckits an' jist come a-foggin'.

How quick they cured my cough ain't the point. Point is, I taken them right over to the Rockin' R waggin fer a hair-raisin' conference with pore Chester.

The boy was a mere shadder of his former self, you might say, worryin' about the horrible unheersutical condition he was in. We found him settin' on the waggin tongue rubbin' hisself with wild onion. He perked up a little when he spied them Whisker Brothers.

"Now then, son," I says, "here is a couple of gents that has shore-'nough got the whiskers. If they cain't tell you what perduces heersuticalness I don't know who kin."

"Well," says Smith Brother No. 1. "It's plumb simple."

"Yes," says Smith Brother No. 2. "All you got to do, you got to have your mother git scairt by a wolf or some such hairy objict, some months before you are borned. It's what they call pre-natural infloonce. Personally our ma was spooked by a herd of wild hawgs with their bristles up."

Well, sir, by the jeepers, boys, that was shore a mighty fine suggestion, but seem like it come a little mite late for Chester.

Pore boy, he jest begun to weep like his heart was a barrel of salt water an' it busted on him. For accordin' to what he blubbers out, seem like he'd been borned in Mexico an' his maw had been badly

spooked by layin' her hand on one of them Mexican hairless pooches in the dark.

He never said whether it bit her or not, nor if it was a gal dog or an hombre dog, but I reckon them points never made no difference.

For here was the sad results. Pore ol' Hennery Chauncey Perceval Chester was doomed to go through life with his whiskerless chin a-bumpin' his bristleless briskit in sorrow an' in shame, all on account of *un perrito pelado Mejicano,* which bein' unpercolated means a little ol' Mexkin hound with the hairy side in.

Yessir, doomed. Or leastwise he would of been if we hadn't of kept chousin' our brains around till finely we hit on an idee. It was Prune-Wart Pete that kindly siggested it.

"Tell you what," he says. "Maybe he's got the hair in his system all right, but it's ingrowin' instid of outgrowin'."

"Lemme see yore tongue, Chester," I says, an' he poked it out. So I grabbed holt and yanked him wrong side out. But his innards wasn't no woollier than his outwards. Anyways we had an idee to work on when we got him shucked right side out again.

"It's plain hair cain't sprout where they ain't any," I says. "Chester, what you got to do, you got to take to eatin' your meat with the hair on."

He said he'd try it, an' when I come back by a month later he'd grown a foot in all directions an' was plumb rollicky in his behavior, doin' things like tyin' an ol' bull's tail to a tree, grabbin' holt of the bull's lolliger, meaning his tongue, stretchin' the bull out twenty, thirty feet an' then whippin' him over fer the boys to play skip-the-rope. But still only three hairs on his chin, five on his chest an' one sproutin' out of a wart about the belt line.

"Uncle Boosty," he says, "seem like the hair is in me now, but jest won't bristle out."

"You wait," I says. "Steer hair jest ain't bristly enough."

So I hunted up ol' Pecos Bill an' swapped him fer a hundred head of wild hawgs an' forty of the bristle-hairedest wildcats we could cut out of his herd, an' drove 'em back to the Rockin' R.

"You munch on these here critters, Chester," I says. "I'll be back. We'll have you as hairy as ol' Sam Houston yit!"

So then I hunted up them Piute Injuns an' swapped 'em my eight hoss-shoe ear rings fer thirty-one dawgs an' a three-legged pet wolf, an' trailed them back to the Rockin' R.

"Chester," I says, "you are now purty well seeded with hawg bristle an' cat hair. You know how cats an' hawgs always bristles up when a dawg chases 'em? Well, here's the dogs. Git you a knife an' fork, an' make shore you don't spit out the bark, because it stands to reason—"

Yessir, gents, you've guessed it. Chester hadn't hardly swallered the sixth dog till the cat an' hawg hair begun to bristle up inside of him an' prickle through the skin.

Unfortunately I was called away right then to go an' repaint them mirages where the Smith Brothers' whiskers had scratched 'em in passin', so I didn't git to observe the results as they taken place. But the next time I seen ol' Chester . . .

Well, I'm purt' near skeerd to tell you about it for fear you'll think I ain't right truthful. What say? Well, first feller ever ketches me in a lie an' kin prove it, I'll donate him these here upper lip hosstails o' mine fer saddle cinches.

Anyways, I was lopin' along by moonlight one night, feelin' mighty proud that my mustaches had finely growed long enough to where I could dally the ends around the saddle horn to anchor me by, everwhen

I hankered to snooze a little without stoppin', when I heerd the dangedest caterwaulin' off north that ever shivered a man's liver.

First I thought it was jest ol' Pecos Bill yoodlin' to call in his remuda of panthers as was his habit. But there wasn't no cattymount squawl answerin' it, so I knowed it couldn't be ol' Pecos. Besides, it sounded more distressful, like a hawg caught under a fence, or a bull with a knot in his tail, or a man that has accidentally set down on a porkypine.

'Course there wasn't nothin' fer me to do but gorge the gigs to my ol' jassack an' go investigate.

Mile or so north of Dog-Leg Crick I begun to run into right smart of brush, an' it was the dangedest, tangliest brush I ever whupped a short-tailed mule through. Hadn't been that I allus kept the edges of my ol' mule's ears filed sharp as a razor an' he kinder slashed out a path with 'em as we went, I misdoubt if I'd ever of made it through. But we got there finely, an' I be dawged fer a wolf if it wasn't ol' Jim Bridger.

"Howdy, Jim," I says, "what you bellerin' about?"

"Why wouldn't I be bellerin'!" he squawks. "Fer forty years, rain, shine or shootin', I been the trail-findin'est scout o' the whole cockeyed West. An' now what happens? I go an' git myself plumb hung up an' lost in a little ol' patch o' bresh! Never was no such bresh in these parts before, so natcherly I mistaken it for a mirage an' rid right into it. If you hadn't of come along, Boosty—wup, there!"

Fer believe it or go learn pigs to squeal, seem like that dang bresh begun to move. Then we heard somebody holler, off north a coupla hundred yards, an' the voice sounded right familiar.

"Hey," it says, "I wisht you fellers would git to hell outa my whiskers!"

Yessir, by the hoodooed name of the feller that drowned the duck, that bresh, it wasn't a daggone thing but the drag of Bristle-Chest Chester's whiskers!

"Hey, Chester!" I hollers. "Quit jerkin' yore chin! It's jest ol' Jim Bridger an' me. How the hell we goin' to git outa here?"

"Grab leather," he shouts, "an' I'll shake you out!"

Well, after he'd shook us an' the mules out of his beard, he throwed it kinder around behind him to the other side of the hill an' hollered to us to come on up an' chaw the fat a spell.

Quick as we could unspook our jassacks, we done so. An' boys, that there hombre was shore one wampus cat of a wild and woolly booger. Not only had growed in size to where all outdoors wouldn't hold him, an' whiskers mighty nigh a quarter of a mile long, but he was shirtless, an' his briskit bristles was long an' thick enough to smother a wolf. Seem like once all that hair he'd et had sprouted through the skin, there jest wasn't no stoppin' it.

He said he was mighty grateful to me fer figgerin' out how to satisfy his hanker fer manly heersuticalness, an' he was mighty proud of it in a way, prob'ly being the hairiest-boozemed buckeroo in the world right at that moment.

But some ways, he said, it kinder bothered him. Said sometimes he couldn't sleep good o' nights fer fear some of his whiskers might take root while he was asleep. Said a man would kinder hate to be tied down thataway the rest of his life. Said he wasn't workin' fer the Rockin' R anymore since the ol' short-sighted Coosie got to mistakin' him fer a wolf an' scaldin' him with the dishwater.

"In fack, Uncle Boosty," he says, "I'm a shore-'nough, bristle-boozemed woolly booger now like I always hankered to be, but if I'd knowed it was goin' to make kinder of a lone wolf out of me thisaway, I don't believe I'd of et so many of them

dogs alive. After alls, I reckon there's other things in life than whiskers an' boozem bristles."

Well, that's what I'd tried to tell him once before when he was jest a slick skinned young waddy with heersutical hankerin's, but he wouldn't believe me, an' I never was no hand for "I told you so's."

So we helt a council of war, an' we decided that as long as he'd got hisself permoted into this here heersutical condition he might as well make some use of it.

Well, gents, the rest is hist'ry, too well knowed to be dwelt on at any length to speak of . . . Me an' Jim Bridger braided ol' Bristle-Chest Chester's hosstails into lariat ropes for him, practicin' him to where he could stand on a hill an' jest by a toss of his head, rope an' ol' wild bull off half a mile south an' another 'un off half a mile north. Then he'd give a twitch to his whiskers an' throw them two bulls so high they'd come down steers. That's how come some called him Half-a-Mile Harry.

All he had to do to stop a stampede was to lay down in front of it an' the cattle would tangle up so bad in his boozem bristles that it wasn't no job at all to git 'em to millin'.

He used to hire out to help them trail herds acrost the floodin' rivers jest by layin' his chin bristles acrost frum bank to bank an' havin' the boys throw a little sod on 'em fer a bridge. 'Course it was kinder messy on a man's whiskers. It sometimes taken me with a team an' a hayrake two, three weeks to git 'em combed out clean for him again.

Ever' time he travelled through a patch of timber anywheres in the mountains, the whiskers an' chest hair would git snagged off on the trees, to where right to this day you can see wisps of it anywheres in the spruce country. Turned gray by now, o' course, an' miscalled moss by forest rangers an' other iggerunt short-tails.

Them railroad builders hired Bristle-Chest Chester to come up into Colorado an' sweep the snow off'n their mountains so they could go right on layin' track endurin' the winters. When it come spring an' the ice thawed out of his beard he combed out eight grizzly bears, an elk, two mountain

sheep, four badgers, a surveyor an' numerous other sech varmints.

An' Jesse James used to steal the reddish streaks out of them whiskers to sell to the guvmint fer red tape.

Main trouble was ol' Pecos Bill got jealous, an' taken to throwin' rattlesnakes into the brush on Chester's boozem ever' dark of the moon.

Didn't they bite him? Well, sir, I reckon they tried to, but seem like the hair was too thick, to where they swallered a lot of it, roots an' all, an' them roots was so potent they jest kep' right on growin' inside the snakes. Yessir, it used to be right smart of a sight to see ol' Chester shake hisself an' maybe twenty, thirty fur-bearin' rattlesnakes come tumblin' out.

Nossir, gents, you don't view no bristle-boozems like ol' Chester's no more. You see a briskit eight inches deep in hair these days an' you hail it fer a curly wolf wonder.

What say? If Chester was sech a he-hoss of a hairy hombre, how come I've outsurvived him?

Well, sir boys, I always kinder suspicioned Pecos Bill of that meanness. Biff, you claim to of been a sea-farin' hombre before them officers run you West. You recollect that patch in the ol' Atmalantic

Ocean where what they call sea-weed clogs up the keels of the ships like cuckleburrs on a bull's tail, to where it takes all hell in a bare hide to git 'em through it? Sourgassy Sea, I think they calls it. (Boosty must mean the Sargasso Sea.—Ed.)

Boys, that ain't shore-'nough seaweed no more'n a horny toad is a fish. 'Course, bein' so long in the water has prob'ly turnt it kinder greenish, but it's hair jest the same. Yessir, the whiskers, boozem-bristles an' so forth of pore ol' Chester, ebbin' an' floatin' in the briny tide.

Fer years ol' Chester used to go sop his whiskers in the Pecos an' use 'em to beat out a grass, bresh or forest fire everwhen one busted out. So one time Pecos Bill started a bad bresh fire way off up in Nebrasky or one of them other foreign countries, an' it was a drouthy year, an' the Pecos was dry, so Chester tried to whip that fire out without wettin' his whiskers, an' Pecos Bill arranged with the devil to throw an earthquake right then, an' it got Chester off balance an' his bristles ketched fire, an' he jest natcherly taken out to the Atmalantic Ocean an' jumped in.

Plumb spooked, he was, an' he jumped out so far he couldn't wade back, an' he natcherly sunk there an' drowned hisself. Next time you're a-sailorin', Biff, take you a dive in them Sourgassy parts an' see if you don't find pore Bristle-Chest Chester's carkiss on the bottom, jest like I'm tellin' you.

Psftooee . . . What was you sayin' 'bout yore Uncle Zeke, Lufe?

"Oh, nothin' much," said the new hand. "Only . . . you right sure that was a brush fire up in Nebraska, Mr. Peckleberry?"

"How come you think I ain't?"

"We-ell," said Lufe, "you know my Uncle Zeke, he was right hairy his own-self. Used to have to burn off his boozem bristles reg'lar once a year, else he couldn't scratch good. Big feller, too, he was. Got hisself mistook fer a brush fire many's the time when he was takin' his annual singe. I was jest sorter wonderin' if—"

"Son," grunted Mr. Embustero (Boosty) Peckleberry, flicking a lighted match through the air and neatly extinguishing it with chaw juice before it hit the wood-box, "how come you allus got yore shirt buttoned up tight over yore briskit thataway? Or don't you take after yore Uncle Zeke?"

Pfstooee . . .

GUNMAN BRAND

A Smashing Novelette

By

LEE BOND

Author of "Breed of the Wolf," "Powder Payoff," etc.

Young Ray Benton was only a few yards from the lip of a deep canyon when the whiplike report of a rifle came up through the still, hot air. The lanky youngster straightened with a jerk, lean hands drifting instinctively to the butts of the guns that were belted about his hips.

He stopped his big roan horse with a low word, falcon-keen eyes raking the rim of the canyon from which the sound of the rifle shot had come. Then Ray's towhead twisted, and his eyes whipped out across the sun warped range to where old Haze Benton, his father, was coming at a stiff pace.

There had been a lot of range butchering by thieves lately, here along the edge of the Arizona badlands. A railroad spur was coming into the country, and a slick

Ray Benton Had No Chance To Fight Back When His Father Was Shot Down In A Vicious Frame-Up By Tully Sartin And His Henchmen. Neither Could He Defend Himself When He Was Railroaded To Jail On A Charge Of Butchering His Neighbor's Cattle. How Could He Save His Own Life And Avenge His Father's Death?

bunch of hombres were feeding those railroad workmen on stolen beef.

Haze Benton's Slash B outfit had suffered heaviest of all, yet every other rancher in the section had reported finding cattle butchered on his range.

"Where'd that shot come from, Ray?" lean, grizzled old Haze asked as he reined in beside his lanky son.

"Yonder canyon," the boy said excitedly. "Maybe, dad, we've got a chance to snag us some o' the sloe-elk artists that have been whittlin' our herd."

"Dunno," the older man said thoughtfully. "That canyon is deep, an' is the dividin' line between our Slash B an' Tully Sartin's Circle S. Maybe that was a Sartin beef that got downed, in which case Sartin can tromp his own snakes."

"I don't like that overbearin' Sartin jasper any better than yuh do, dad," Ray growled. "But just the same, I think we ought to investigate that shot."

"Shore we will," the older man nodded. "Only reason we're doin' it, though, is to try to get a look at them sloe-elkers."

Side by side the two spun their horses, galloped over to the rim of the canyon. They found a steep game and stock trail, slanted their broncs down it. When they hit the bottom of the canyon they both nodded wordlessly, for they could hear that hoarse, throaty bellowing of cattle that were sniffing fresh blood.

He topped a ridge and could see riders pursuing, but spurred the roan on toward his home spread.

"A butcher at work, shore as hell," old Haze Benton growled, and rolled the hooks.

Ray slammed steel to his own mount, and was beside his father as they hammered around a bend in the canyon. They were rearing back on reins the next moment, for just ahead of them lay a beef steer that had been dropped beside a water-hole.

The steer had been stuck, and someone had slit the hide inside the legs and along the belly with a skinning knife. Yet there was no one in sight, and the Bentons sat stiffly alert, guns bared as they raked the brushy slopes about them with keen eyes. Four or five range cows stood around the dead steer, bawling hoarsely and slobbering at the smell of blood.

"Watch sharp, boy," old Haze called. "Yuh've got one of the fastest draws in the country, Ray, an' I've won lots o' money bettin' that yuh could put more bullets in less space than ary other man. But yuh may have to shoot at somethin' besides a target this time, button."

"I—I savvy, dad," gulped Ray, fully aware that he was plenty nervous. "Yuh're tellin' me not to get boogery in case we have a scrap."

"In case we do jump them snakes, don't do any serious shootin', son," the old fellow said almost calmly. "Bust some legs or arms, but let it go at that. Never shoot to kill unless it's forced on yuh."

Ray nodded, uneasy as he started about.

"They must have heard us comin' an' high-tailed," Haze called finally. "Come on, let's have us a look at the brand on that steer."

They walked their horses forward, halting finally beside the water-hole where the steer lay. A good sized rock had been edged in under the carcass on each side, to hold it belly up while the butcher worked.

"Circle S," Haze Benton grunted. "Wish to gosh we could have sighted the gent that done this. I don't like Sartin, but he'd snag them sloe-elkers if he caught 'em workin' on our stuff, I reckon. We—Listen!"

Hoofs hammered somewhere down the canyon, and a moment later two riders came into view.

"Sartin an' his foreman," Haze Benton grunted. "This saves us havin' to hunt him up an' tell him about this."

The Bentons holstered their guns as the two riders came hammering up to halt facing them.

"Say, what the hell does this mean?" Sartin thundered. He was a big, bull-necked man, with coarse features, pale little hooded eyes, and a brushy mop of red hair that even his floppy hat failed to hide.

Old Haze Benton explained quickly how he and his son had heard a shot and had come to find the steer lying there beside the water hole.

Sartin's thick, wet lips twisted into an ugly sneer, and there was a flare to the nostrils of his flat nose. He shot a meaning look at Milt Harper, his lank, hook-nosed foreman, then edged his horse forward, hands close to gun butts. Milt Harper's squinty green eyes were watching Ray Benton narrowly, and the Circle S ramrod also edged his bronc forward.

"Let's see yore hands, yuh two," Tully Sartin snarled. "Sounds damned fishy, that story yuh told."

Old Haze Benton flushed, but bit back a hot retort that had come to his lips. He held his gnarled hands out, palms up.

"No blood on my hands, Sartin, which means I didn't start workin' on that beef," he snapped. "Take a good look, then start apologizin' for what yuh hinted at. Ray an' me ain't lowdown sloe-elkers, so . . ."

Haze Benton never finished his speech. Tully Sartin's huge, hairy hands were suddenly filled with roaring guns, and the grizzled Benton was literally slapped from

his saddle by a half dozen bullets that tore through his chest and head.

Ray Benton yelled in horror, but the yell died in a gasping sigh as the butt of Milt Harper's six-gun crashed into his temple.

"An' our trap worked purty as Christmas," Milt Harper laughed thinly. "Man, I shore slapped that kid to sleep."

"Yeah, so far so good," Tully Sartin growled. "But git busy. While I roll up ol' Benton's sleeves, smear his hands in beef blood an' plant that bloody skinnin' knife in his hand, yuh work on the kid. Roll his sleeves up high, smear his hands an' arms in beef blood, an' be damned shore yuh git a few spots on his britches. This has got to look right, even if Sheriff Ned Hobart is our man."

Guns Flame

A swiftly swelling crowd followed Tully Sartin, Milt Harper and their bound prisoner along Coyote's one ugly, ill kept street. Voices lifted to a roaring blast, and questions flew thick and fast. Yet the Circle S men did not halt until they were before the squat little jail that crouched as if ashamed under the lacey boughs of giant pepper trees.

The crowd swarmed around the three riders, and men stared hard at the white, strained face of Ray Benton, whose arms were bound tightly to his sides. The youth's dark eyes raked the sea of faces, and his lips trembled as if he wanted to speak. But Tully Sartin was speaking, yelling profane orders for the crowd to keep back. Then Sheriff Ned Hobart was ploughing through the crowd, cursing and kicking men who got in his way.

The sheriff was a burly, thick-jowled man, with hard, small, steely gray eyes, a meanly slanted mouth and the reputation of a cold-blooded killer.

"Here, what in hell does this mean?" the sheriff puffed, breaking clear of the crowd to stand glowering up at Ray Benton and his two captors.

"Sheriff, arrest Tully Sartin!" Ray called in a choked voice. "He murdered my dad cold. Do yuh hear? He *murdered* him!"

In that same choked voice, Ray Benton told the sheriff and the assembled crowd exactly what had happened out there in the lonely canyon.

A murmur ran through the crowd, and Milt Harper's cold eyes squinted as he let his bony hands rest on twin gun butts. Old Haze Benton had been well liked, and there were some ugly sounding voices in that crowd.

But Tully Sartin held up a big hand for silence, hooded eyes raking the crowd. "This boy is lyin'," he said calmly. "Milt an' me heard a shot in Eagle Canyon an' went to investigate. We found ol' Haze Benton an' this kid o' his skinnin' out a Circle S beef. Haze made a swipe at his gun, but I downed him afore he could draw. Milt batted this kid to sleep afore he could git into action, an' we fetched him in.

"Saddle up, anybody that wants to, an' come out to Eagle Canyon with the sheriff an' me. Yuh'll see fer yoreselves that I'm tellin' it straight."

"It's a lie!" Ray yelled. "Sheriff, I told the truth."

"So yuh an' yore ol' man are the ones that have been sloe-elkin' everybody's beef, hey?" the big sheriff roared, and reached up powerful hands to yank Ray from the saddle.

The youth, his hands tied, could not help falling face down in the dirt. He rolled over slowly and sat up, spitting blood and dirt, eyes hot dark slits as he stared at the sheriff.

"I forgot, tin-star, that yuh're one o' Sartin's hired flunkies," Ray snarled. "But get this, yuh snakes. Dad was murdered, an' I'll go through hell an' high water to make Sartin pay."

The sheriff kicked Ray's face, then booted the boy's body across the dirt sidewalk to the door of the jail. Ray managed to get his feet under him, but fell into the jail house headlong when the sheriff kicked him savagely once more.

Then the lawman was in there with him, dragging him by the collar across the tiny space that was the sheriff's office and down a corridor to a musty little cell.

Battered and groaning, the boy was slammed into the cell. He felt the ropes go loose about him, but was too sick at the moment to think much about it. When he finally lifted his blood and dirt smeared face from the floor the steel barred door had been closed, and the sheriff was leering triumphantly in at him.

"Fastest draw an' the best shot in the territory, are yuh?" the sheriff snarled thickly. "Well, I'll see that it's used agin' yuh at yore trial, yuh damned little snake."

The lawman was gone then, and Ray lay half sobbing on the floor, thinking only of his father's murder, trying in vain to shut the ghastly memory from his mind. He heard riders roaring up and down the street, shouting Tully Sartin's lies as they explained the excitement to new arrivals.

Ray pulled himself up to the tiny barred window and stood on tip-toes looking out while a band of riders roared out of town. He watched them until they were out of sight, then turned and threw himself upon the cell cot.

But there was no rest for him. He kept seeing his father pitch backwards under that hail of smoking lead, and kept thinking of his mother, who was not very well. How would she take this awful news? The doctor had warned that she must not be unduly excited, since her heart was bad. The trouble, the doctor explained, might pass in time.

Ray felt sore and tired, yet thoughts raced tumultuously in his head. He cleaned his face as best he could, and spent the afternoon pacing up and down the floor of the tiny cell.

The shadows were long when the riders who had left town returned. But no one came near the jail, and Ray Benton stood there at the window, white face pressed to the bars, still dazed from the shock of the tragedy.

It was near midnight when the croupy, booze soaked old jailer came down the street with chubby little Doctor Grabe. The jailer carried a lamp to Ray's cell and stood grinning a mean grin, chuckling like a turkey buzzard over a bloated carcass. Doctor Grabe squinted through the bars at the boy, swearing roundly at the youth's battered, dazed condition.

"Doc, fog out to the place an' see about ma," Ray choked. "Yuh know what yuh said about her heart. When she hears what happened today . . ."

"Take it easy, boy," the doctor said quietly. "I heard this afternoon, and went right out to your place. I brought your mother to town, and she's at my house, with my wife looking out for her. I'll do all I can, son."

Ray shuddered, sensing the fatal pronouncement in the little doctor's last sentence. The doctor was moving away, followed by old Buck Cameron, the derelict jailer.

Young Benton was still standing there at the bars, trying to fight off the horrible numbing of this new tragedy, when feet again thudded in the corridor and big Tully Sartin came swaggering down the narrow hall ahead of the sheriff.

The two stopped before the boy's cell, grinning faintly at him. It seemed only a few moments ago that the doctor had stood there, warning Ray of his mother's critical condition. But sight of his two enemies erased some of the grief-fog from the youngster's brain, and he realized for the first time that daylight was breaking, and that his cell was strangely gray and chill.

"Well, kid, how's jail by now?" Sheriff

Ned Hobart laughed, and Ray smelled whiskey and sweat and horses as the two leaned against the bars before him.

"What's this all about, Sartin?" Benton choked. "Why did yuh murder my dad? Why are yuh havin' me held here in this hole?"

"WE won't go into that," Sartin snarled. "What I come for was to tell yuh that yuh're a maverick now. Yore old lady kicked the bucket a hour ago, so yuh're sole owner of the Slash B.

"I want that spread, kid. Talk turkey with me, sell me the place reasonable, an' I'll forget about pressin' charges ag'in' yuh. Try buckin' me, an' I'll send yuh over the road. I'll have the papers drawed up, an' by noon . . ."

Something snapped in Ray Benton's brain as he stood there. Maybe it was the brutal bluntness with which Sartin delivered the news of his mother's death. Or maybe it was the gloating grins on the faces of the half-drunken hellions who stood there beyond the cell bars. Something suddenly tore loose inside the boy's skull with a dull popping noise.

"You killed her, Sartin!" His voice was a scream of grief-shot rage. "Damn yore black soul, yuh killed my mother, too, when yuh murdered my dad!"

Like some wild thing Ray Banton leaped. His arms slashed out through the bars, fists hammering the faces of the two renegades before their whiskey-numbed brains could warn them out of reach. Blood spurted from Sheriff Hobart's fleshy nose, and Tully Sartin was spitting out a huge, yellow tooth and a mouthful of blood as he fell back against the cells opposite.

"I'll kill yuh two!" yelled the youngster wildly. "Do yuh hear me? I'll kill yuh two just as sure as powder will burn."

"Like hell yuh will!" Tully Sartin snarled through bloody lips. "Git set, damn yuh. Here's lead in yore guts!"

Sartin's big hands swooped, came up with twin guns. Then the jail seemed to shudder under the roaring blast of exploding powder as Tully Sartin triggered his guns.

A Tough Break

SHERIFF Ned Hobart had leaped in time to slap Sartin's guns aside. The burly sheriff lunged against Sartin with one brawny shoulder, sending the man sprawling. Sartin cursed wildly.

"Stop it, yuh damned fool!" the sheriff roared. "Kill that kid there in his cell an' we'll both swing."

The sheriff's words seemed to pierce the rage-fog that had blinded Sartin to the thing he had tried to do. Cursing thickly, he got to his feet, ugly eyes blinking as if just awakening from a bad dream. He holstered his guns, swiped a huge hand across his battered mouth.

The sheriff was daubing at his own nose with a grimy handkerchief and glaring at Benton, who stood looking at them as if they were rank strangers.

"Gawd, that kid's eyes!" the sheriff croaked, and beat a hasty retreat, Tully Sartin at his heels.

Men were charging down the street toward the jail as the two stepped out, despite the fact that it was barely daylight.

"That Benton kid tried to escape on us," the sheriff explained to the swampers, early rising merchants and tipsy revelers who had not seen a bed all night. "He walloped Tully an' me a few times, but turned yaller an' scooted back into his cell when Tully shot over his head a couple o' times."

The explanation seemed to suit the listeners, and the sheriff marched on up the street, cursing under his breath as he felt gingerly of his swollen and still dribbling nose. Tully Sartin was swearing over the pain of that gaping space where a tooth had been not long ago.

The pair were in an ugly mood by the time they reached the Buckhorn Saloon and began downing drinks. Sartin kicked a scrawny old swamper halfway across the house for sweeping dust over his boots. Sheriff Hobart roared an oath at frowzy old Buck Cameron, the jailer.

"Git yore damned nose outa that whiskey glass an' rattle yore hocks to the jail," the sheriff ordered harshly. "An' stay there until I come to relieve yuh. Do yuh hear, yuh worthless ol' son?"

"I—I hear yuh," the old reprobate muttered uneasily, and sidled towards the front door. "I fergot to feed that Benton younker last night, so I'll go git him a breakfast now an' lug it over there."

"Do, an' I'll break yore damned neck," the sheriff snarled. "I aim to sweat some o' the starch outa that kid. If yuh feed or water him afore I tell yuh to, I'll tromp yuh."

The old jailer sensed the sheriff's mood and shuffled away on unsteady legs. He hiccoughed as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, bleary eyes trying to focus on the scabby buildings that swirled and danced before him. Buck Cameron was drunker than usual, and had trouble keeping his feet under him as he lurched along the sidewalk to the jail.

"I heard how that Benton younker busted Ed an' Tully Sartin with his fists," he growled thickly. "An' I'll tell that blasted kid a few things fer startin' trouble in my jail."

He was still muttering when he stumbled through the door and across the sheriff's office. From a peg he took a battered shell belt that held a holstered Colt and buckled it about his middle.

Buck Cameron liked to imagine himself a tough customer, when he had a belly full of rotgut. He screwed his seamed face into a mean scowl, and straightened his scrawny shoulders as he marched down the corridor. The big ring that held the cell keys was at his belt, and he laid a gnarled hand on the butt of his holstered Colt as he halted before Ray Benton's cell.

Ray got up from the cot and came forward, face a lean white mask, eyes still mirroring that wild something that had driven him to smash the faces of Sheriff Hobart and Tully Sartin.

"Smacked the sheriff an' Sartin, didn't yuh?" the frowzy jailer sneered cockily. "Good thing yuh didn't try that on me. Got a rep fer bein' the best shot in the country, ain't yuh? Well, I'd like to see yuh try swappin' lead with ol' Buck. Hell, I'd make a sieve outa yuh afore yuh could unleather ary gun."

"Go get me some water an' grub," Ray Benton's snarling voice whipped out. "Yuh smell worse than a wet hoss lot, an' yuh're drunk to boot."

"Hongry an' thirsty, hey?" the jailer leered. "Well, yuh don't git ary drop a water or ary crumb a food fer a week. How's that, swellhead? An' don't try sassin' me back, either. I was a tough hand afore yuh was weaned, an'—Hey, what the hell! Leggo uh me!"

Ray Benton's hot, glittering eyes had spotted that key ring on the drunken jailer's belt. His left hand shot through the bars, lean fingers closing like iron bands over the jailer's gun wrist.

Now Ray's right flashed out, ripped the keys from the old rascal's belt. Buck Cameron was trying to yell, sobered by sheer fright as he stared up into that white, set face. The youth's left hand wrenched down and over, and the jailer fell with a wail of pain, dropping the half-drawn pistol.

Holding the old scamp by that tortured wrist, Ray managed to unlock the cell door with his free right hand. He gave the door a hard shove, releasing the jailer's wrist.

Then he was outside, kicking the jailer's gun away. He stooped, lifted Cameron bodily, and slammed him into the cell.

"Make a fuss if yuh want," Ray snarled thinly, turning the lock. "I want Sheriff Hobart an' that Sartin snake to come down here lookin' for me."

He turned and stalked down the corridor, boot heels ringing grimly. In the sheriff's office he found his Stetson and twin guns. His movements were slow, deliberate, as he belted on the guns, examined them to make sure that they were fully loaded.

Old Buck Cameron was either too frightened to yell or too dazed, for he had made no sound.

Ray drank thirstily from a water bucket that was in the sheriff's office, then stepped out onto the street. He moved almost leisurely around the building and out to the shed behind. He found his big roan and saddled it, hot eyes watching the street closely. It was less than two hundred feet from the sheriff's corral, and men were walking along it.

Every nerve in Ray Benton's lean body fairly screamed for speed, for a mad rush from the town and out into the open rangeland. But the youth knew that a sudden charge for freedom might prove his undoing.

Those men along the street yonder were paying him no attention as he led his saddled roan from the corral, swung up. But at that moment Buck Cameron's whiskey-soaked voice lifted from the jail in a thin yowl that brought men to sudden stops.

"Jail break!" the old hellion was howling. "Ray Benton is out. He'll head fer the corral after his hoss. Help!"

Heads swung, voices lifted in a yell as three men spotted Ray. He saw them crouch, saw their hands streaking for guns. He saw, too, that one of the men was a Circle S puncher.

Ray's lean hands dipped as the three men directly before him opened fire. He slammed his horse straight at the three, a hellish something pouring through his veins as he slanted his guns.

A bullet smashed into his thigh with the hammering impact of a sledge. Ray rocked in the saddle, almost lost his seat. But he was shooting now, a cold, deadly calm over him despite the hurt of that wound.

Ray saw the Circle S gunman fall kicking, as one of the others raced away, a bloody, mangled hand clutched to his middle. Then Ray's horse was spinning on slim hind legs, and the youth saw things go black. He cursed through white lips, trying to see through the curtain of blackness that was closing down on him.

He holstered his guns, groped for the tied reins that were across his roan's neck. His fingers found the smooth ribbons of leather, clutching them instinctively. But Ray Benton was fainting, and thought dimly that he had lost after all.

A Grim Resolve

Instinct alone held the boy in the saddle as his bullet-stung roan whirled and bolted for the open country. Teetering on the brink of unconsciousness, Ray knew vaguely that the horse was squealing in pain, and that he was about to be jolted from the saddle.

His lean legs were clamped to the mount's flanks, and somehow he slung his body forward to balance himself better. Then the beat of fresh air in his face began thinning the fog that was numbing his brain.

A red hot pain was hammering at his right hip, and he heard his own voice groaning curses. He was shaking like a leaf, and cold sweat wet his skin as if he had been plunged into a river. But the shock fog was lifting now, and he managed to settle himself more firmly in the saddle.

The roan had carried Ray into a shallow wash at the edge of town and was roaring towards the opposite slope when

he began to realize how things stood. He swerved the grunting roan, knowing that to start up that open slope would mean exposing himself to the pursuit.

He glanced back, but could see no one as yet. Then he remembered hearing his horse screaming in pain, and looked the roan over as best he could, a new fear clutching at him. He saw blood spraying from the roan's left shoulder, and leaned down to feel of a deep rent in the tough hide. But the bullet had done no material damage, and Ray straightened to examine his own wound.

His head was still spinning, and he was sick from the throbbing pain. But he forced his fingers to gouge and probe the blood soaked levi's at his right hip.

"No bone busted, which is somethin'," he thought in relief. "But it feels like that slug is lodged in there."

Ray tried to forget the pain, and to note his surroundings. After a few minutes he got himself located, and chose a draw that would swing him to the west where his Slash B ranch lay.

Half an hour later he topped a ridge and studied his back trail through pain glazed eyes. He could see riders coming, but could not make out the number. He had a good lead, however, and turned his horse up along the ridge, favoring the harder, more open ground for speed.

An hour later he roared into the Slash B ranch yard, his suffering made more poignant now as he saw the flowers his mother had so carefully tended. The youth's eyes blurred, and there was a lump in his throat that choked him as he hobbled up to the porch and past the two rocking chairs that sat side by side.

His mother and father had liked to sit in those chairs evenings and talk until the stars were out, and the warm desert winds brought the pungent smell of sage and the cries of night birds and animals.

Ray saw that his mother's gray woolen shawl, which she herself had knit, was still spread over the back of one rocker. Perhaps she had been here on the porch yesterday, waiting for her son and her husband to come home when the news reached her about Haze Benton's passing.

Ray sobbed an oath and was reaching for the door when Stub Baker, the fat, moon-faced Slash B cook stepped out. The latter stared at him slack-jawed.

"Gawd!" the cook croaked. "Ray, yuh —yuh're shot?"

Ray nodded, hobbled on into the house. He tried not to look at the familiar things in the living room, things that brought back memories of his mother's sweet, patient smile and his father's good humor and hearty laughter.

The youth stripped off his blood soaked clothing, stepped into his bedroom and flung himself down on the bearskin rug. He could not bear to lie across that white, billowy bed with his flesh dripping red blood and clammy sweat. Those sheets, those snowy pillow cases, had been placed there by his mother's hand.

Sobs choked him as he lay there. Then he got control of himself and looked up at Stub Baker, who was staring down at him.

"Get yore razor an' sterilize it, Stub," Ray gritted. "Find clean rags, an' that first-aid kit dad always kept around. There's a slug lodged under my hide here an' yuh're cuttin' it out."

"Me?" Stub gasped. "Hell, Ray, I never done nothin' like that. Yuh'll have to let me go fetch a doctor."

"I busted jail, an' killed a damned Circle S snake," the youth snarled. "There's a posse on my trail right now. Will yuh get this slug out, or do I have to do it myself?"

Ray fainted when Stub's razor bit down through his flesh and struck the bullet. When he regained consciousness Stub

was bending over him, tears wetting his white face.

"God, Ray, I tried to hurry," the cook choked. "That slug was deep, an' I had to clean the hole it made goin' in. Here, drink this."

Ray had never bothered with hard liquor. But he drank the stuff thirstily now, gagging a little as it seemed to peel the skin from his throat.

Within a few minutes the whiskey was whipping new life into him. His body had been washed clean of blood, and there was a tight, thick bandage about his thigh.

Ray got to his feet and dug clean clothes from a closet. He dressed hurriedly, strengthened now by the fiery liquor that was making him feel strangely light on his feet.

Ray took another small drink from the bottle. "Got any more o' this?" he asked.

"Another quart," the cook nodded. "I stole them two bottles from Curly Furness the last time he come home with a jag on. But I wouldn't hit that stuff too hard, Ray. Yuh ain't used to it, and it might knock yuh cold."

"Get me the other bottle," the youth snapped. "Then go saddle Satan, the black stud, for me. Put blankets, camp tools an' grub behind my saddle."

A hard, wild look was in Ray's eyes, and the cook did not stop to argue. Five minutes later the youngster was out at the yard gate, crawling aboard a big, powerfully built black stallion that whinnied a greeting to him.

"The other quart is in that roll behind yore saddle," Stub said. "There's cooked grub there, too. Where yuh goin', Ray?"

"Places!" The lean youth gritted. "Tell Curly Furness to take charge here until I get back. Curly has been on the spread ten years an' knows how to run it. If he needs more help than the other three punchers we've got now, tell him to hire extry hands. An' thanks for doctorin' me, Stub."

Ray gouged the stallion with spurs and went roaring down to the corral. He slid the catch back without dismounting, let the gate swing open. He rode into the corral, got behind the bunch of horses that were snorting and milling, and shunted them out the gate.

He emerged just as a band of riders swarmed toward the house along the town trail. Faint yells reached Ray's ears, and he grinned mirthlessly as bullets began whispering their death song about his ears.

"Keep outa this, Stub," Ray yelled, reaching to unsheath the Winchester that was riding in a saddle scabbard beneath his right stirrup leather.

The cook scooted behind a big gate post, and Ray Benton levered a shell into his rifle. One of the horses he had just turned out fell kicking a few rods away, neck broken by a wild bullet from the posse.

Ray snarled in rage, whipped the Winchester up, and sent a warning shot over the heads of the foremost riders. They wheeled in panic, hunting cover as other rifle balls snarled dangerously close to their hides. Ray grinned mirthlessly, spun his stallion, and roared after the fleeing saddle stock he had freed.

"The posse will be ridin' fagged broncs," he mused. "With no chance to get fresh hosses, I can be in the badlands an' have my sign fogged before they overtake me again."

Ray meant to hole up in the lava country until his thigh was healed. But the whiskey he had drunk had numbed the pain in that wounded thigh until he could think now with crystal clarity. It occurred to him that to head for the badlands meant staying there three weeks or so, because once that wounded thigh stiffened up it would be a long time before he could ride again.

"After what happened today that blasted sheriff sure will hang the killer brand on me," Ray thought bitterly. "An' what'll

happen to my spread within three weeks? Besides that, they'll be buryin' my folks tomorrow or next day, an' I ought to be at the graveyard."

Ray glanced back as he reached rough hills. The posse was stringing out after him, spurring cruelly. But those men were mounted on horses that had already given their best.

No longer fearing pursuit, he turned his attention to the crooked canyon he was entering. And as he rode a small, devilish voice began whispering things somewhere within his brain. Ray sat bolt upright at first, trying to analyze the stabbing thoughts that seemed like a small voice. Then his head nodded slowly, and there was a hard set to his wide mouth. He had come to a decision.

"Why not?" he spoke aloud. "If I was to head for the Circle S now, there'd likely be three of us Bentons buried by tomorrow or the next day. But what the hell would that matter, as long as I got Tully Sartin? Why hole up in the badlands like a scared coyote? They've branded me a killer, an' I'll live up to it."

Ray spun his big black sharply into a side canyon. That canyon would bring him out on Circle S range, only a mile or so from the big Circle S ranch house. He was heading hell-bent for showdown.

Powder Smoke Reckoning

Tully Sartin had quit the posse at the Slash B. He cursed the sheriff now as he rode towards his own spread on a winded horse. His filed rowels brought blood from the bronc's sweaty hide, and the tortured beast tried gamely to hit a faster pace over the rough ground.

Sartin had shot old Buck Cameron through the belly when he found him locked in the jail cell. Sartin was rage-crazy now, and cursed himself through foam flecked lips for not having shot the sheriff along with Buck Cameron.

Sartin's horse died under him as he dismounted at the yard gate of the huge Circle S ranch house. He leaped aside to avoid the falling beast, cursing it as it hit the dirt. Then he was racing up the graveled walk to the porch where his foreman, Milt Harper, stood staring at him.

"What's up, boss?" Harper asked sharply. "Somethin' must be shore bad, or yuh wouldn't have kilt that Vinegar hoss o' yores gittin' here."

"That damned Buck Cameron let Ray Benton best him an' git outa jail," Sartin panted. "I shot Cameron an' helped chase that Benton kid as far as the Slash B. How many o' our boys here?"

"Drag Dennis an' two others are out mendin' corrals," Harper answered. "But tell me more about . . ."

"Quit gabbin' an' listen," Sartin snarled. "Where's the rest o' the hands?"

"Up in Forked Canyon, buildin' them corrals that yuh wanted to hold the Slash B stuff we aimed to collect," the foreman answered swiftly, sensing the dangerous mood of his boss.

"Then git two o' them punchers that's here headed fer Forked Canyon like their tails was on fire," Sartin snarled. "That Benton kid will head fer the badlands, an' I want our boys scattered out down there to snag him. A thousand to the man that reams him, an' no questions asked. Yuh an' Drag Dennis come back to the house soon as the other two are on their way. Git a move on!"

The lank, hook-nosed Harper jumped from one end of the porch and ran towards the distant corrals. Tully Sartin glowered back at his dead horse, then stomped on into the big, low-ceilinged living room that was crudely furnished and badly in need of a good cleaning.

He got a jug and glasses from a corner shelf, planked them down on a stout center table, and seated himself heavily. He was finishing his second drink when Milt

Harper and Drag Dennis came tromping in.

Dennis was a runty, rat-faced little hellion, with watery blue eyes and a chinless face that was forever screwed into a weak grin.

"Throw a slug or two o' this stuff into yore guts," Sartin invited sourly. "We've got a job cut out fer us."

The two nodded uneasily, seated themselves at the center table, and poured drinks.

"That Benton kid kilt Chip Goss as he made his run outa town today," Sartin growled.

"Chip was a friend o' mine," Milt Harper snarled. "Me, I think I'll ride down yonder to the badlands an'—"

"Yuh'll stick here," Sartin cut in savagely. "The boys kin handle Ray Benton while we take care o' the sheriff."

"Huh?" Harper grunted. "What yuh mean, boss?"

"That damned star-toter bared his fangs today," the Circle S owner rasped. "When I shot Buck Cameron, the sheriff blowed up. The snake swears he'll jail me, an' only let me loose on my word that I'd stick here until he rode back fer me."

"The hell!" Drag Dennis gulped thinly. "Boss, I thought Hobart was all fer us."

"I've told yuh that that thick-witted fool could be handled only so far," Sartin snarled. "That's why I never put my cards on the table an' let him know what was what. We've used him, shore. But only because the dumb jigger didn't savvy our game."

"Say, this don't smell so good," Milt Harper snapped. "With Ray Benton on the loose an' the sheriff aimin' to jail yuh, boss, looks like our plans has backfired."

"Not yet they ain't," Sartin bawled. "The boys will snag Ray Benton an' we'll take care o' the sheriff. That way we can make it look like the sheriff got sore an' killed Buck Cameron. There was only me an' Hobart in the jail when I drilled Cameron."

"But what if Hobart talks?" Drag Dennis gulped.

"That's what I want him to do," Sartin grinned twistedly. "Then we'll polish Hobart off, an' I'll swear that I had to do it because Hobart was tryin' to kill me so's I couldn't tell how *he* lost his head an' shot Cameron for lettin' that kid escape."

"No wonder yuh've got the biggest spread in the country, boss," Drag Dennis cackled. "Hell, with yore brains nobody kin outfox yuh."

"Curly Furness an' them other three Slash B punchers kin be handled easy," Milt Harper nodded. "But how about this sheriff business, boss? How do we work that?"

"Let him ride up an' come in the house," Sartin ordered. "Yuh'll be hid yonder behind them chairs, Drag. Milt an' me will auger with the tin-star, an' I'll lay my cards all on the table. If he don't take the money I'll offer him to fergit what he knows, ream him an' ream him plenty."

The men exchanged smirking grins as the jug was lifted from the table. But if those three hellions could have seen what was happening out at the back of the house their grins would have vanished.

Ray Benton was easing up a back window, throwing a long leg over the sill. He had left his horse back of the corrals, hidden in a thicket, and had hunkered there waiting until the two departing Circle S punchers were well out of sight.

Ray had overheard enough from those two as they roped and saddled mounts to know that the Circle S hands were heading for the badlands to hunt him down.

He eased himself along the hall, to halt finally beside an open archway that led into the living room. He heard hoarse laughter and the uncorking of a jug.

"That damned sheriff will never throw in with us an' take the money I aim to

offer him," Sartin's voice came plainly to Ray. "So have yore gun ready, Drag, to let him have it. An' keep shootin' until he's dead. There's a hundred cash in this if yuh do the job right."

"Trust me, boss," Drag Dennis cackled. "I'll be spendin' that hundred on that blond dance hall gal that fell fer me last pay day."

"With the sheriff an' Ray Benton put six feet under, we kin take the Slash B without further trouble," Milt Harper hummed. "But, boss, there's one weak spot."

"What yuh mean?" Sartin growled.

"That feller that's been buyin' sloe-elked beef from us to feed the railroad crew," Harper rasped.

"Say, that Fred Morgan feller ain't gonna talk none," Sartin rumbled. "We sell him the beef we sloe-elk at half price. He sticks the railroad company full price, an' makes as much outa the deal as we do. He'd go over the road to the pen if he opened his trap, so . . ."

"So that's the howcome an' why-for, eh? Steady, gents! Yuh might bust a leg if yuh get up too quick."

That cold, toneless voice was like the boom of a gun to the three Circle S hellions. They stared in open-mouthed amazement at Ray Benton as he stood in the archway, hands swinging free at his sides, eyes alive with cold, bright lights.

"W-where'd yuh come from?" Tully Sartin gulped hoarsely.

"It's where yuh three are *goin'* that counts," Ray's voice ripped at them.

Milt Harper laughed almost coolly, reached a slim hand out slowly, and lifted his drink. He drained it, smacked his gash lips, and grinned coldly.

"That, kid, was a toast to the worms that'll be in yore grave," he said thinly. "Yuh come here askin' fer it, so . . ."

The glass flipped out so suddenly that Ray Benton did as any other man would have done. He dodged, and in that brief instant hell tore loose.

The youth felt the hot breath of a slug on his cheek even as his own hands drove down and up in a speed that few eyes could have followed. He felt the hat ripped from his head, and saw that both Milt Harper and Drag Dennis were shooting at him. Then Ray's guns snuggled against his hips, and his body swayed slightly forward as his thumbs began to move.

Drag Dennis lurched backwards, blood spilling from his open mouth. Blue smoke hung like a shroud in the room, and through the smoke Ray saw the pale blur of Milt Harper's thin face, saw Harper's teeth gleaming whitely. The next moment those teeth exploded as Ray's guns blared together, and a ghastly scream lifted, to end in a gurgling sigh as Milt Harper wilted across the table.

Ray saw that but dimly, however, for a slug had smashed into his right side, driving him back through the archway. Another bullet slicked flesh open along his cheek, and his brain began that sickening plunge towards blackness.

Then out of that powder fog came the hate-distorted face of Tully Sartin, leering at him over twin guns that spat a hellish, flaming thunder. Ray shuddered as lead burned along his right forearm. Then by sheer will power he straightened, lips skinned back in a snarling grin, left hand Colt beating a roaring reply to the hammering explosions of Sartin's guns.

Sartin's face convulsed, and a hoarse yell roared from his open mouth. His tongue lolled out. Ray heard him fall with the limpness of the dead.

But the youth's ears had caught a roar of voices from outside. He turned drunkenly, saw the Colt that had spilled from his right hand, and was lifting it in his good left hand when the front door smashed open and a hoarse voice called his name. Ray slid down then, but watched

men stream into the room, heard their oaths of amazement.

Then big, grizzled Curly Furness was lifting him in strong arms, carrying him from the powder fogged room and out onto the porch. When things cleared a little Ray looked up into Curly's pale face and grinned weakly. Beyond the Slash B cowboy stood a score of merchants from Coyote town.

"Take it easy, Ray," Curly said hoarsely. "When me an' the boys didn't show up at town, I reckon yuh figgered we'd let yuh down."

"I wondered some," Ray admitted in a tired voice.

"Well, the boys an' me sorta put two an' two together when we heard what had happened," Curly explained. "So we lit a shuck fer that railroad camp an' hunted up a feller name o' Fred Morgan, who buys supplies fer the whole crew."

"What did yuh do that for?"

"To find out where them railroad workers got their meat," Curly growled. "Yore dad bid on the contract, but Morgan turned him down. But that hombre shore talked plenty when the boys an' me made out like we aimed to hang him."

"Yeah, we know now, Ray, that Sartin an' his bunch has been sloe-elkin'," a grizzled merchant growled. "We also know, son, that yuh told the straight o' what happened to yore dad."

"Yuh—yuh mean that?" Ray gasped.

"Shore, the truth is out," Curly nodded. "Sartin shot ol' Buck Cameron through the belly, an' Cameron talked before he cashed his chips. The ol' cuss was in cahoots with Sartin, keepin' Sartin posted on Sheriff Hobart's movements at all times."

"Then—then Hobart won't be pokin' me back in jail?" Ray gulped.

"That big son will be pokin' country behind him," the merchant growled. "Hobart wasn't actually mixed with this Circle S bunch. Yet he was dumb enough to be a tool in Sartin's hands. Which means the citizens o' this county will ask for Hobart's star, then kick his south end until he makes hisself scarce."

"An' I'll vent the killer brand that was forced on me by runnin' the Slash B like dad an' ma would want me to," Ray said slowly. "With some patchin' up an' a little time, I'll be all right." He smiled faintly. "An' I reckon dad will maybe look down from up yonder an' know that I had to go against his advice an' settle things the way I did."

The Cactus City Department

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 17 NO. 51

MURDER OVER AT TWOMBLEY-TWOMBLEY'S

Over New-Fangled Device

You can't mix oil and water. That is something which everybody knows except Algy Twombley-Twombley, and maybe even Algy has got wise to that by now. Of course, it wasn't oil and water which Algy was trying to mix up, but it was two things which don't mix any better.

You all remember that when Algy bought that ranch of his he had it all fixed up with Modern Improvements, including the first inside outhouse in Cactus County with running water. Yeah, he made it very up to date.

But then, instead of hiring a couple of Chinamen to do the cooking and looking after things, like everybody else does, why Algy he hires him a bunch of Injuns off'n the Reservation. The reason he wanted these Injuns ("house boys" he called 'em) around his place was because he thought it made his ranch Very Quaint.

Well now, there is nothing wrong with being Quaint if you want to, but you can't very successfully be Quaint and up to date at the same time. The two things just don't mix.

However, Algy he didn't realize that until just the other day when he went into his bathroom and stumbled over a corpse. This corpse had been clubbed to death very efficient. In fact, it was clubbed so good that Algy couldn't recognize who it had been, right off. He had to round up all his guests, which same his place is always cluttered up with, and count noses before he figured out that the corpse was what was left of Lord Oswald Humphrey-Humphrey.

Now this was very sad indeed, and also sort of unhospitable, seeing as Lord Humphrey was a guest and not just a local citizen. Right away Algy demanded to know who had done this awful crime of killing a harmless Englishman and Lord.

"Ugh! Me killum!" spoke up one of the Injun house boys.

"Indeed! Railly!" says Algy kind of flabbergasted. (You know how he talks.) "But I say, old fellow, that's hardly cricket, you know. Lord Humphrey was a guest."

"Lord Humphrey, he no good!" grunts the Injun.

"I beg to differ. Lord Humphrey was a bit of all right and a jolly good fellow," argues Algy, just as if it made any difference.

"Lord Humphrey, he no good," the Injun grunts over again. "Me catchum Lord Humphrey spit in spring. Ugh! Me killum!"

(Well, you can't blame the Injun very much. Hell, there's a lot of white folks don't know that all running water ain't a drinking spring necessarily.)

PUBLIC NOTICE

A lot of folks has lately been complaining about the crackers which they have bought at my grocery store. The crackers, they tell me, have a very awful taste, like rats had been running around over them.

Now, folks, that is ridiculous. I know dang well there ain't been no rats in my cracker barrel, because the cracker barrel is where my tom cat always sleeps. So that funny taste probably is only fly specks or something harmless like that.

(Signed)

SHORT-WEIGHT WESTON.

PERSONALS

There was a lot of complaining and criticising after the bank robbery the other day. Folks seemed to think that Sheriff Banning should have rode out after the bunch that did the stick-up. Well now, you got to remember that election is a long time off. There wouldn't a been no point in the sheriff tearing out and getting hisself shot and maybe killed. By election time people would have forgot all about it.

The Official Coyote Hunter and Varmint Exterminator for this state is now operating here in Cactus County. Not mentioning any names, but I thought I'd warn some of you rannyhans, so you could stay close to home.

TOURIST TELLS T-BONE TILLIE THING OR TWO

It ain't very often that anybody comes out ahead of T-Bone Tillie, but the other day a tourist did same mighty neat. This tourist come into the Longhorn Café and Lunch Counter De Luxe and ordered a ham sandwich. Tillie fetched it for him and then, because he was a tourist, she said the price would be four bits. Now naturally that sounded pretty steep for a piece of moldy ham between a couple of slices of stale bread, and the stranger said as much.

"Take it or leave it," snaps Tillie, acting very indignant like.

"I'll leave it!" declares the tourist. "You can put it back in the safe."

EDITORIAL

There is an old saying which says, "Whatever is worth doing is worth doing well." Now, I know that most of you minus-minded citizens wouldn't recognize Wisdom if it walked up and kicked you in the pants, so I will point out that there is a lot of wisdom in that old saying above. It is a thing you should ought to remember, especially when you are doing a job of lynching.

Folks, the last lynching we had (which was yesterday when Tenspot Sparling was strung up), was a disgrace to our Fair City. For one thing, I think the wrong gent was hung, but that's a small item. The disgraceful part was the way this lynching was done. It was very amateurish and sloppy.

The first time they tried, the Amateur Lynchers had the rope too long. When the horse was drove out from under Tenspot, why his feet touched the ground, and there he was standing unharmed and cussing because he was being give such a bungling job.

The Amateurs did better on the next try, but even then it wasn't very good, because the knot slipped and Tenspot was choked to death instead of having his neck snapped neat. It sure was a poor job. And I guess even Tenspot thought so, cause as he hung there dying he looked pretty disgusted with the whole affair.

You can't blame him neither. It is things like that which give a town a bad name. So tomorrow, or whenever you citizens do a job of lynching, you better do it well. If you don't, Cactus City will pretty quick get the reputation of being a renegade town where men ain't even hung well. Where is your Civic Pride, you hombres?

July 4th this year being a holiday, this paper will not be published.

SOCIETY DEPT.

There was a lot doing in a social way this week. Too dang much, if you ask me. Seems like folks would be more considerate and spread things out a little. Personally, I missed two funerals and a wedding account of these functions was taking place at the same time as some other social event.

Another argument against bunching things up is that there is bound to be some confusion and misunderstandings. Take Wednesday for instance. There was a christening took place at the church in the morning, and a wedding that afternoon. But somebody got the two mixed up and sent the wrong thing to the wrong affair. The bride was very embarrassed and indignant when she opened up a present containing some baby clothes.

But maybe the worst thing about this sudden stampede of social events was that thirteen of us citizens let ourselfs in for some bad luck. There was just that many of us sat down to dinner on Friday out to the Flying W, and you know that when 13 folks set down together, somebody is going to suffer. Of course Mrs. Rawlins hadn't planned for that; she'd invited maybe twenty people, but a lot of them was too busy at some other affair.

Even then, things would have been all right if Mr. and Mrs. Maverick Moore had got there; that would have made fifteen. They started all right, with Maverick driving them out in a buckboard. On the way, however, Mrs. Moore had a baby, so they had to go back to town. The baby wasn't expected till next week, but you know Maverick; if there's any chuck-holes in the road he'll hit 'em.

So hereafter, I wish you folks would plan things a little better. (In case anybody wants to know, I ain't got nothing planned for around dinner time on Sunday.)

SIZZLING IRON CAUSES MIRACLE

But Dummy Explains It

It ain't often that a miracle takes place here in Cactus City, so when one does and then turns out not to be a miracle after all, why it is pretty disappointing. Howsoever, maybe this almost-miracle will be a lesson to you folks who go along believing that a thing is what it looks like to be, instead of what it really is.

You all know Dummy Duncan. Last week he was fourteen years old, and in all them fourteen years he hadn't ever talked. That's why he got his nickname, of course, because folks all figured he was a dumb mute.

Well, yesterday, Dummy was out to the Flying W, loafing around the corral where they was branding some calves. Somehow he got in the way, and accidently (maybe) the gent who was handling the branding irons touched Dummy right on the seat of the pants with a red-hot iron. It burned pretty deep, they said, 'cause you could smell burnt meat as well as the odor of scorched pants. But the point is that when Dummy felt that searing iron against his hide, why he opened up and spoke right out loud.

"Ouch," he said, very indignant.

Of course, everybody just about swooned in surprise, and the hombre who had singed him exclaimed, "Dummy talked! He found his voice after fourteen years! It's a miracle!"

But Dummy he spoke up again, very belittling, "Miracle hell! I jus' never had nothin' to say before."

TWO-HOLE SLIPS

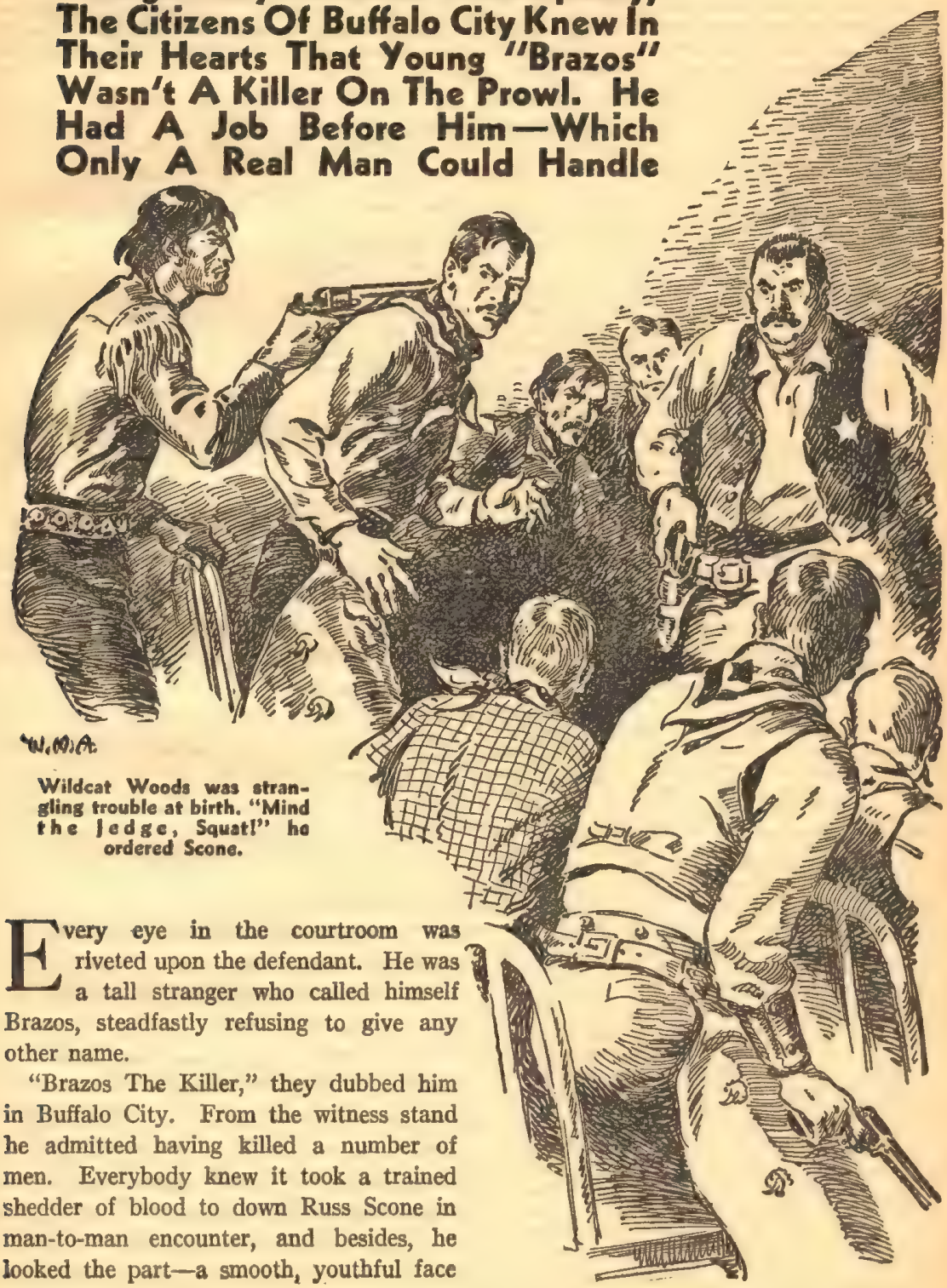
Two-hole Toomey suffered a broken leg, a sprained ankle and some miscellaneous bruises when he fell down a pit in Donnelly's backyard the other day. However, it was a brand new little place that Two-hole was building, so things wasn't so bad as if he'd fell into a pit while doing a repair job.

WORK FOR

By

CADDO CAMERON

Though They Avoided Him Openly, The Citizens Of Buffalo City Knew In Their Hearts That Young "Brazos" Wasn't A Killer On The Prowl. He Had A Job Before Him—Which Only A Real Man Could Handle



Wildcat Woods was strangling trouble at birth. "Mind the judge, Squat!" he ordered Scone.

Every eye in the courtroom was riveted upon the defendant. He was a tall stranger who called himself Brazos, steadfastly refusing to give any other name.

"Brazos The Killer," they dubbed him in Buffalo City. From the witness stand he admitted having killed a number of men. Everybody knew it took a trained shedder of blood to down Russ Scone in man-to-man encounter, and besides, he looked the part—a smooth, youthful face

A KILLER

that was sardonic and bleak and unnaturally composed in the shadow of the loop.

Beyond the door to an adjoining room, sat a jury with evidence enough to hang him.

In a row of chairs at his back, were four brothers of the man he killed. The Scone clan—Fenton, Wolf, Stub, and Hank—dangerous men, hide-out guns bulging beneath their shirts and their attention fixed upon him and that door with grim expectancy.

Overflowing a chair at his right sat Ben Tobe, the burly sheriff, who openly packed the Scones' iron, whose piggish eyes bespoke treachery and regarded him hungrily.

Apparently insensible to his surroundings, Brazos gazed in calm meditation at a little gray spider patiently stalking a fly on the table leg at his knee.

At his left sat the prosecutor, smug and merciless, who craved to make his name a terror and owed his political existence to the Scones' power.

The room behind him was jammed with Buffalo County citizens, a tough and seasoned lot representing all degrees of virtue and vice. They had come to watch his trial and execution under the laws of the State of Texas, unanimously agreeing that a verdict of guilty was a foregone conclusion, because no local jury would dare fail to convict the man who killed a Scone. They spoke nervously in low tones, cursing the delay, smoking and fidgeting and craning their necks to watch the prisoner for signs of weakness, and casting anxious glances toward the jury room door.

At a table before him sat white-haired Judge Malcolm Farnham, a spearhead of law recently thrust into this remote and lawless frontier. His broad shoulders ignored the weight of years, and his clear blue eyes occasionally looked straight across at the Scones, enemies who were in

a fair way to crush him politically and financially.

Minutes loitered past with devilish deliberation, and the crowd became increasingly restive under the strain of waiting for the jury to fashion a knot wherewith to hang a man.

Brazos' inhuman composure irritated the morbid spectators. They longed to watch him twist and squirm as they were doing, and furtively look about for an avenue of escape. Instead, he languidly arose to his unusual height, hitched up his jeans pants, and stretching his arms to the limit of their length above his head, yawned, and ran long fingers through the yellow hair that swept over his high forehead in heavy waves.

A hush settled upon the room. Talk, nervous laughter, the tinkle of spurs and the scrape of boots abruptly ceased. From Woolsey's Trading Post on the ground floor beneath the courtroom, came the conglomerate smell of hides, dried fruit, kerosene, bulk coffee, woolens and calicoes, axle grease, saddle and harness leather. Through open windows floated the voice of spring, singing farewell to a departing day—mocking birds, meadowlarks, whip-poor-wills, katydids. Upon the soft murmur of the breeze rode the neighing of a horse . . .

Listening, his thin nostrils expanded slightly, Brazos stood like a column of rugged stone . . . It was his horse Red at the corral, calling for its master.

A wistful, far-away stare softened his hard features for an instant. But he quickly squared his shoulders, set his jaw, and let his cold blue eyes rove leisurely over the crowd. He sat down comfortably.

Men recalled that a few hours ago, in this same unperturbed manner, he had looked at the jury, the judge, the four Scones, and the spectators, when he took the stand without an attorney and told his simple story.

"They ain't no sense beatin' 'round the bush 'bout it," he had said. "Red was stolen. I trailed the thief more'n three hundred mile. Caught him with the hoss and told him to draw. He done it. I drilled him."

Then, as now, they marvelled at his unconcern.

A large yellow grasshopper fluttered through a window and lit upon the table near Brazos and the sheriff. Tobe caught it and held it up by the head. The insect kicked and struggled, and his wicked little eyes glared at the defendant with cruel suggestion.

Brazos built a cigarette with steady fingers. . . .

The sheriff slowly pulled off the hopper's head and dropped the dismembered body to the table.

Brazos inhaled with evident satisfaction, and dreamily watched smoke curl upward . . .

Suddenly, as though jerked by an unsteady hand, the wooden latch clicked back in its slot. Many ears were attuned to the sound, and a ripple of cautious commands silenced the room.

Brazos deliberately dropped his cigarette, and carefully smothered it with a boot. The door creaked open.

"Order in the courtroom!" rumbled the judge.

Twelve grim men stalked across the floor in single file toward a bench on the left. Their twenty-four boots clattered with the noise of a hundred; the tinkle of their spurs jangled upon the nerves of the spectators.

Suspense was ripping at the vitals of a crowd that would hang a man with enthusiasm in the heat of excitement. One fellow whispered huskily to his neighbor, "Jest a-hangin' the pore cuss by inches. Damn this here new-fangled law business!"

Brazos casually glanced at the jury, and quickly turned his attention to the judge. His gaze fastened upon a peculiar scar high on the old man's neck. It stood out

like crimson embossing on ancient leather.

For an instant the gunman's stony face masked rioting thoughts. More forcibly than ever, that scar proclaimed the truth of what it told him when first he saw it ten days ago.

His father!

With a coolness proceeding from utter indifference to danger, Brazos momentarily ignored his surroundings and gazed back through the perspective of years . . . His mother lived again. Her wistful voice minutely described the man, much older than she, very tall, with that scar on his neck—the path of a Blackfoot arrow.

She had known he'd meet his father some day . . . the father who had killed a man who deserved death, and to escape the gallows had fled alone to new territory . . .

Time had gouged furrows in the man, leaving the scar untouched. No doubt about it. The man who soon would sentence him, that grizzled old fightin' man who had been kind to him, kind to a stranger and a killer, was just the "dad" he dreamed of finding.

Under his code, circumstances left but one thing to be done. Therefore Brazos The Killer faced his father and kept the knowledge to himself, after the manner of his breed of men.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

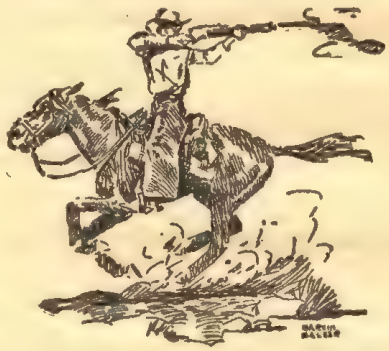
"Yes, sah, Jedge!" Old Sandy Fraser, the foreman, blurted the answer as though he hated to say it.

The judge sat rigid for a moment, gazing through a window with unseeing eyes. The verdict meant more to him than to any other man in the room, except the accused himself.

Should they succeed in hanging Brazos for killing one of their number in a fair fight, the Scones would establish their absolute mastery of Buffalo County. So this trial was Judge Farnham's last stand; his back was to the wall. Violating rules of procedure and frequently exceeding his judicial powers, he had worked heart and soul for an acquittal.

And now he hesitated to call for the verdict . . .

Exchanging stares with Fenton Scone, the judge gripped a shotgun with his right



hand while the fingers of his left bit into the table's edge until their knuckles whitened.

But his voice was level and firm. "The defendant will stand."

Brazos momentarily caught his father's eye, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips, vanishing as quickly as it came. Swinging out of his chair with easy grace, he slowly turned and swept the crowd with a glance that seemed to assert his scorn for all creation.

Into the hush crept the forlorn call of his horse. A muscle rippled along his angular jaw. . . .

For an instant Judge Farnham's face was animated by an odd expression of defiance and recklessness. Without a word, he thrust a hand into the table drawer and dragged out two cartridge belts with filled holsters attached. Brazos' eyes narrowed. His guns—exhibits at the trial . . .

The room was very still. Two sharp clicks sounded clearly—the judge cocking both barrels of his shotgun. Breathlessly, the crowd sensed a lurking challenge in his deep bass when it rolled out:

"Buckle 'em on and tie 'em down, Brazos, and use 'em if you have to. But if you try to escape I'll kill you! Understand?"

Brazos calmly took the belts. "Reckon I do, Jedge. Much obliged to you, sah."

A wave of amazement traveled up and down the room. As one man, the four Scones and Sheriff Tobe came out of their chairs growling profane protests.

"Set down!" roared the judge, lifting the muzzle of his gun. "Order in the courtroom!"

They subsided sullenly.

Six-shooters at his thighs, Brazos ambled around the table and took a stand by the judge's chair. The old man arose. And so they stood, father and son, judge and killer, stalwart figures side-by-side confronting their enemies; one with seamed face and apprehensive eyes, the other with carefree insolence and the alert, intense gaze of a wild animal.

Judge Farnham's mellow tones seemed to fit into the silence without breaking it:

"Gentlemen, you may read the verdict."

Gnarled and twisted and grown gray on the plains, Old Sandy Fraser teetered on his bowed legs and struggled with his voice . . .

"Yes, sah, Jedge. . . . We the jury . . . uhh . . . Not Guilty!"

CHAPTER II

A Man's Gal!

As he fired the final words, Old Sandy and each of the jurors jerked a gun out of his shirt.

Gripped by surprise, stunned into silence and inactivity, men who were prepared to stage a demonstration could do no more than watch and listen and hold their breath.

Like magic, the words erased lines from Malcolm Farnham's face. His chin came up, his eyes flashed, and an air of triumph clothed him with becoming dignity.

Brazos received the verdict with no noticeable change of expression, calmly standing with hands on his hips and weight on one leg. But his glances darted to various points in the room, appearing to see everything and everybody at once.

Fenton Scone was the first to recover. Youngest but cleverest of the brothers, he was their acknowledged leader. He started to his feet, his thin, aristocratic face set in hard lines, his large black eyes blazing, and his dapper figure fairly trembling with anger.

Justice giving birth to trouble. Men clamped their jaws and waited.

Promptly mastering his rage, Scone aimed a withering smile at the judge and jury, and glanced quickly at the sheriff. At that instant the muzzle of a gun jammed into the back of his neck with force enough to stagger him, and a great voice boomed:

"Hold 'er! If ary gent gits hostile, I'll blow this here polecat's haid plumb through the roof, 'cause I'm out for hair! Waugh!"

All eyes switched to the speaker. They saw Brazos' devoted friend, mentor, and constant companion for years—a weazened little man of doubtful age, whose beady black eyes glared out of a wolfish face with thin lips and a long high-bridged nose, framed by sooty hair that fell in straight strings over his forehead and ears.

As he leaned across the back of Scone's chair, his body gave the impression of slender springs carelessly bound together with rawhide thongs and catgut, and covered by old leather that would turn anything short of steel or lead.

Wildcat Woods, strangling trouble at birth!

Judge Farnham's fist crashed onto the table. "Scone! Wildcat! Set down! I'll have order in this courtroom!"

Again Wildcat jabbed with the gun.

"You heathen Digger, whar's yo' manners? Mind the jedge! Squat!"

Scone sat down gingerly.

But Wildcat remained on his feet, balancing his six-shooter experimentally and glaring balefully around as though in search of another victim.

The judge masked his amusement with a scowl, and spoke harshly. "Wildcat Woods, you're in contempt of court. Set down!"

Wildcat's chin sagged. He sank to his chair, staring doubtfully at the judge and grumbling, "Contemp'? I don't rightly onderstand, Jedge. But if you're a-tryin' to say that this here co't don't shine with me, you're wrong as hell. She's the best damned co't I ever ruckused in, and I ain't talkin'."

The tension broke. Snickers arose on every hand. Even the judge smiled as he pounded the table for order.

Still holding their guns, the jurors settled to the bench, a measure of relief visible on their troubled faces. Matches spluttered and smoke blossomed over the spectators. The judge and prosecutor retired to a corner and opened an animated conversation in low tones.

Heads together, the Scones talked in whispers punctured by occasional poisonous glances at the jury. Presently Hank Scone, the vicious, hook-nosed rifleman and knifer, uncoiled from his chair and slouched out of the room.

Seated immediately behind Fenton Scone, Wildcat casually slipped a bowie knife from its scabbard at the back of his neck and sedately fell to stropping it on the sole of his moccasin. He rarely wore boots when afoot.

Brazos took a chair across the table from Sheriff Tobe, and met the glance of a girl. He had seen her before; she had sat through the trial from beginning to end. Once while the prosecutor was making a devastating verbal assault upon his past life, he thought he read a message of sympathy in her large brown eyes. But he quickly decided it was a mistake. A girl like her would have no sympathy for a killer . . .

He knew he shouldn't stare, but couldn't help it. He liked her heavy chestnut hair, especially a rebellious curl that drifted across her temple. That little bunch-quitter was cute as a colt's tail.

The longer he studied them, the more he liked her sensitive lips, round olive-tinted cheeks, and firm chin. He'd gamble she had even teeth and plenty of 'em when she laughed. And he particularly liked the freckles on her little turned-up nose. Just the kind of a nose that oughta pack a few freckles . . . A healthy, straight-up-ridin' gal that any fella would be powerful glad to have for a wife . . .

But he was a fool to hanker after a girl like her. He, a killer! A target for any barroom gladiator who craved to make a name for himself. The lawful prey of any gunman who might be jealous of his reputation. She wouldn't tie herself to a man who was due to go out any minute, possibly before her very eyes.

And the hell of it was . . . he didn't want to be a killer. He didn't want folks to pay him respect because they were afraid of his guns. He wanted them to like him because he was a man with sand in his craw, a fella who'd go the limit for a friend.

He was too proud to show it, but nevertheless it cut deeply when the boys dodged friendly arguments with him and cautiously refrained from making him the butt of their practical jokes. He wasn't touchy; they didn't have to be afraid of his guns!

Given half a chance, he'd be as friendly as a wet pup. He was hungry to play, and argue, and occasionally have a good, honest fight with his fists, and to poke fun, and have fun poked at him like any other reckless young cowhand. He knew he was a good hand, and it hurt like hell to feel that the outfits who hired him didn't give

a whoop for his knowledge of cows, or his ropin' and ridin' and love of work. His wages were always fightin' wages. They wanted his guns, damn 'em . . .

Sometimes he wished he'd never learned the fightin' tricks Wildcat taught him—tricks the deadly old killer had gleaned from mountain men, plainsmen, Mexicans and Indians. But more than once they had saved his life.

Dragging himself from this dark tangle of thoughts, Brazos listened while the judge ordered his release.

A free man, he reflected bitterly, glancing at the Scones. But still a killer with a pack of killers slinking along his trail, watching and waiting for one careless move.

Something drew his gaze to the girl: She smiled—a friendly, wholesome, man-to-man sort of smile, and he knew it was for him . . .

"Kil-ler! Kil-ler! Kil-ler!" maliciously crackled the decrepit old clock on the wall nearby. He turned a stony face away from the warmth of her smile.

Old Prairie Joe saw the gesture, combed his whiskers with gnarled fingers, and whispered huskily to Wildcat, "I allow he don't behave noways nacheral. Reckon he's jest a wallopin' big icicle of pizen water, froze plumb solid both ways from his brisket."

"Sartainly!" snapped the old-timer. "And them as thaws him is damned shore to larn they done thawed out a rattler."

Gazing through a window, his mind straying completely off the range, Brazos distantly heard the judge thanking the jury for having remained true to their code of honor as cowmen and frontiersmen, and praising their courage as strong men in a hard country, dispensing justice regardless of consequences.

"Brazos!"

He arose and faced his father.

On his feet, stern and deadly serious, the old man spoke with feeling:

"You're now free to go, and I urge you to start at once—this evening! Keep goin' until you have left this valley far behind you."

Judge Farnham paused to choose his words, and Brazos thought bitterly, "Don't want me here. Don't want another killer a-hangin' 'round."

The judge continued, speaking with the unconscious eloquence of a man whose heart was in his subject:

"Go so far your reputation as a gunfighter can't follow you. Your life is before you. Beneath your cold, unmoved, prematurely aged surface, I think I see the bubbling enthusiasm and happy spirit of a boy. Go among strangers and drop that repulsive mask which intimate acquaintance with bloodshed and death has moulded to hide your real self.

"Devote your great body, fine courage, and good sense to the healthful pursuits of an honest citizen, to the end that in your declining years you may not be forced to sit alone with memories crowded with dead men!"

Judge Farnham hesitated briefly, and a sympathetic light touched his eyes.

"Brazos, my boy," he said, "if you have no such place to go, I'll give you a letter to a friend of mine who owns a big outfit on a quiet range. It's a long ways off. He'll be glad to have you . . . and he doesn't talk."

Brazos felt his throat tighten. A strange sensation . . . Top hand on a quiet range with a big outfit. Broncs to tame. Round-ups, ropin' and brandin' and cussin' and workin' like hell. Maybe take a herd up the trail—somethin' new and excitin'. And the fellas . . . a heap of fellas to hell 'round with, a-courtin', a-dancin', and a-pryin' up ruckuses in town. He'd be jest plain Brazos, or mebbeso Larry Malcolm. But no longer Brazos The Killer!

He stammered, "J-jedge, I'd shore like—"

The old judge gasped and spun half way around as the vicious crack of a rifle came

ripping through the silence. A patch of blue smoke burst out of a window in the upper story of a building a hundred feet away.

Before anyone realized what had happened or could utter a sound, and so swiftly they failed to follow his movements, Brazos whipped out a gun the judge had given him, and fired two shots through a window into that patch of smoke.

The same instant Wildcat had sprung from his chair. Leaping across those who barred his way, with all the agility of the animal after which he was called, he dropped through a window to the ground a story below, and lit running.

Holstering his gun with a lightning movement, Brazos caught the judge as he went down and eased him into a chair. The next moment the room was in an uproar, a confusion of curses, questions, and a general scrambling toward the front.

The girl broke through the jam of struggling men and threw her arms around the old man's neck. Tenderly laying his

head against her shoulder, she smoothed back his hair and whispered brokenly, "Oh, Dad! I knew it! I knew they'd kill you!"

Brazos smothered an oath. Her dad! His father—her dad? His half-sister! . . . A stunning revelation. It set his thoughts to spinning.

But his hands flew with certainty, removing Farnham's long black coat and ripping open his vest and shirt. When he saw the wound he breathed a sigh of relief and muttered to the girl:

"Hit him over the heart at an angle and glanced 'long a rib. Bad slash, but won't kill him. Kick of the slug knocked him out."

Her thankful glance touched his heart.

The bulky sheriff crowded close and leaned over to stare at the wound. "Whew-w-w! Betcha he's a goner. Too damned bad!"

Brazos hurled him aside with a vicious thrust of his arm. "The man needs air. Git!"

With the help of old Sandy, he carefully laid the judge on the table. The girl folded his coat and placed it under his head. Stooping quickly, she ripped out a section of her white underskirt and arranged it over the wound. Her lips were colorless and her eyes moist, but her jaw was set and her hands steady.

"No faintin'. A man's gal," thought Brazos. His sister! He was proud of her.

Several men went for the doctor. Waiting, Brazos gazed down at his father's drawn cheeks and parted lips, at the girl's little brown hands bravely trying to staunch the flow of blood. And at her bowed head . . .

The old man who fought against odds to clear him, and wanted to send him to a place of safety at a time when his guns were most needed . . . The girl whose smile had warmed the heart of a lonely killer surrounded by enemies . . . Old Sandy and the other jurors who had set him free, risking their lives and property to do it. . . .

Brazos clenched his teeth. The big outfit on a quiet range again spread before him, but now it was a mirage, distorted, tantalizing, disappearing. The pounding of a fightin' bronc's hoofs, and the yells, laughter, and advice of the fellas perched on the corral grew fainter and fainter. The bedded trail herd was swallowed by a red mist, and the doleful singing of the night-guard faded away . . .

His nails bit into his palms. The moan-

ing of steers, the clatter of hoofs and the clash of horns vanished beneath the roar of guns, the swish of lead, and the scrape of steel on bone. The smell of singed hair and a branding-fire was smothered by the stench of blood and gunsmoke . . .

Brazos The Killer had a job to do!

CHAPTER III
Wildcat Kills a Man

He straightened up, towering over those around him. His face was that of an older man who had seen hope blasted and ambition stifled. The savage face of a man defiantly on his way to hell.

His gaze ranged over the lean, sinuous length of Fenton Scone, meeting an ominous, triumphant stare without change of expression.

His eyes explored the hairy bulk of Wolf, a man no taller than himself but seventy-five pounds heavier. A creature with loose, sagging lips, red-rimmed eyes, and the bullet-shaped head of an imbecile. A beast who killed with his hands, and whom all women feared.

And he met the colorless, unblinking eyes of Stub, the artistic gunman who killed for the love of slaughter. A ratty face, unnaturally sallow and devoid of feeling.

Hostile forces measuring strength! The room fell silent . . .

Brazos turned to the sheriff and drawled, "Don't calc'late to find the bushwhacker, do you, Tobe?"

The officer's heavy face turned a deeper red. "Well, I—shore I do! Soon as ever I know how bad hurted Jedge is."

A slight twitch pulled at a corner of the Killer's mouth. Spurs tinkled nervously and boots scraped the floor. The crowd backed away. The judge groaned and breathed with a rasping sound.

Suddenly from somewhere outside rose the wailing bugle-note of the lobo wolf, long and penetrating, ending in an eerie tremolo fit to raise the hair on any man's neck.

Brazos listened. A red beam from the setting sun fell across his eyes. They were smiling.

"No need to put yo'self out, Tobe," he muttered grimly.

"What in hell was that?" demanded the sheriff, and other excited voices echoed the question.

Gazing steadily at Fenton, Brazos answered in colorless tones, "That was Wildcat. He's counted coup. They's a daid man in that there house over yander."

Scone's lids narrowed slightly. "Hope he got the skunk that shot Jedge," he declared easily. Stepping closer to the girl, he continued in a voice that dripped insincerity, "I'm stayin' in town, Midge. Send for me if you want anything."

She neither answered nor met his glance.

With a sweeping gesture he started for the door. "Come on, fellers! We're in the way here. Let's clear out and give Doc room to work when he comes."

The room emptied quickly, only Sandy and three of the jurors, close friends of the judge, remaining behind.

They grouped around the table and gazed down at their stricken leader. Tired old men courageously selling out their souls in unequal conflict with the elemental forces mustered by a ruthless frontier; unselfish old men whose code would not permit them to remind another of a moral obligation to them. But Brazos imagined he read the same unspoken question upon each solemn face. "What d'you calc'late to do 'bout this?"

So he quietly told them:

"Fellas, I reckon you onderstand how I feel 'bout the verdict, and the jedge, and . . . everybody else."

"Oh, shore," answered Sandy. The others nodded.

He glanced down at the girl. Her eyes were upon him, glowing with a strange, fierce light.

"Miss Midge," he said levelly, "when yo' dad wakes up, please make sartin to tell him I'll be powerful glad to git that there letter. But I won't be needin' it for a short spell."

The four old men carelessly traded glances.

"Then you don't aim to leave right away like he said you should?" she asked in a low, tight voice.

"No, ma'am. Anyways, not tonight."

"Where are you going now?"

The gunman's face softened a shade. "Down to the corral to say 'Howdy' to Red. Ain't seen the cuss for more'n two weeks."

"Why are you staying in Buffalo Valley?" persisted Midge.

Brazos dropped his eyes to his boots, shifting his weight from one foot to another. "Got me a leetle job of work to do befo' I go. Work for a killer, you might say."

Midge came to her feet quickly, the supple lines of her small body suddenly taut. "There's plenty of work in Buffalo County that the law can't handle, Brazos. Work for a man!"

He grinned crookedly. "Reckon they's a heap of things law-abidin' citizens cain't do."

Old Sandy growled something deep in his throat.

Before Midge could answer, Brazos reached down and pulled his hat from beneath a chair. "Here comes the Doc. So long, folks."

Brazos ran quickly down the steps on the outside of the building to the sidewalk, and found Wildcat waiting there. The old-timer's fierce eyes fairly blazed. The young man knew the symptoms. Trouble was brewing.

"It's 'bout time you come," growled Wildcat ferociously. "Betcha you been struttin' 'round the jedge's slick leetle beaver kitten while I fit, bled and died over thar in a onholy den of iniquity."

Brazos ignored the complaint. "Was it the lanky Scone coyote with sunk eyes?"

"Nope," replied Wildcat, maliciously reticent.

"Then who the hell was it?"

"It war a Injun or leastwise a breed, 'bout the size of a wallopin' big buffaler. A gal said he's Sam—the only beloved son of Injun Jim who has took many a prime sculp for Fent Scone."

"I'm a-listenin'," urged Brazos.

Wildcat jerked his battered Stetson over one eye to a jaunty angle.

"That thar place is The Rio Grandy, a right smart honkytonk. When I charged through it, I killed fo' men and crippled fo'teen gals a-gittin' to the top floor. You done creased Sam 'cause he war jest weavin' through a door when I got thar. Old Satan'll shore have to take no less than a hundred and one stitches in Sam's sculp whar yo' slug raked him."

He paused to stuff tobacco into a hostile old corn-cob. "What's our next move, Papoose? Do we high-tail it for tall timber, or make our fight like men?"

Brazos' fingers bit deep into the old-timer's bony shoulder. "Yo' next move is to tell me what happened!"

"Git yo' ba'r-trap claw off'n me befo' I slit yo' gizzard!" snarled Wildcat. "Wa'n't a daggoned thing happened that's wuth tellin'. Me and Sam had a leetle argyment and I done me a mite of carvin'. The gals is getherin' the pieces, sorta fittin' of 'em back together so thar won't be so damned many of Sam to plant. No, sah! In all yo' bawn days, you ain't never seen a daider bushwhacker than pore Sam is now."

"Good work, old-timer," was Brazos' quiet comment. "You got somethin' on yo' mind. What is it?"

Wildcat leaned against the store front, sending sharp glances up and down the

street. "While you been lazyin' 'round in the calaboose a-puttin' on fat, I worked my fingers to the bone a-makin' us some friends and larnin' a heap of things. One of them thar friends jest told me the Scones is figgerin' to hold a fust-rate dance here in Buffalo City befo' long. Everybody gits a invite. Free likker."

"Uh-huh. Go on."

The old warrior chuckled grimly. "Me and you gits us a special invite, 'cause we been ee-lected to do the dancin' . . . onderneath a limb with our moccasins a-wavin' in the breeze. My medicine tells me that's bad!"

Brazos was busy with tobacco and papers. "D'you know any mo'?" he asked without looking up.

"Gallopin' grizzlies!" His personal cuss word. "Ain't that a-plenty?"

The gunman lifted his shoulders casually. "Let's mosey down to the corral."

Wildcat growled an oath. "Mosey 'long and I'll eat dust in the drag jest to make shore nobody sinks a tommyhawk into yo' fool haid. Reckon it won't do no good, but you might as well know I scouted ontil I found a larrupin' fine hole for us to fort up in, back 'bout seven mile in the edge of the hills in heavy timber. Cached some grub and ca'tridges thar, too."

Brazos grinned down at him. "Seein' I was mighty nigh sartin to hang, how come you figgered we'd ever need that there hole?"

"Huh! My medicine told me."

"Wouldn't be surprised," solemnly. "You talked with yo' medicine, and who else?"

Wildcat's long nose vanished in a cloud of vile smoke. "Wal-l, it's like this," he drawled. "I did sorta intymate to the jedge what my medicine said. Him bein' a fust-rate mountain man, I knowed he'd onderstand."

"The jedge!"

Thrusting his stringy neck forward out of his deerskin vest, the old-timer bobbed his head like a buzzard. "Yup! And he told me never to go contrarywise to my medicine."

" 'Spect so. But what did yo' medicine say?"

Wildcat defiantly jabbed holes in the air with his stubby pipe-stem. "It said, 'If them fellas don't onloose the Papoose, you gotta do it yo' ownself by bustin' the calaboose all to smithereens and that thar kittle-bellied sheriff to boot.' That's perzactly what it said, and the jedge swore I had me a damned fine medicine, powerful strong."

Brazos regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, grinned, and settled his belts comfortably on his hips. "Let's go."

With Wildcat lurking a few paces in the rear, he set off leisurely through the twilight along the busy sidewalk, exploring his surroundings with eyes that caught every suspicious movement, and listening with ears trained to catch the faintest hostile sound.

The same old story. Men contrived to get out of his way without appearing to do it intentionally. No one rubbed elbows with him, or bumped into him and laughed or swore and passed on. Isolated. Avoided like a mad dog. And tonight, for the first time he admitted it should be so. He was a killer on the prowl.

Deliberately setting out to kill certain men, Brazos was not inspired by vengeance, hatred, anger, or any of the other human emotions that usually influence one man to kill another. Personal injustices he had suffered at the hands of those men were no consideration. In his cold-blooded fashion he looked upon his gruesome task as the only way in which he could fulfil a great obligation he owed to others who were unable to protect themselves.

If he lived he'd finish the job, but he wouldn't kill until he had to. Knowing it to be a fool play, he'd first warn the Scones to run. Give 'em a chance he

knew they wouldn't take . . . then finish the job if he could.

His visit with Red was brief. Two men were sitting on the trough whittling, and he eyed them with hard suspicion. Guards, he'd gamble. Scone was trying to hold him for the dance!

According to Wildcat, the Scones and Sheriff Tobe went directly from the courthouse to The Rio Grande. Without a word, Brazos strode off purposefully in that direction.

It was the hour of dusk, when the world disconsolately assumes a mantle of darkness, when man's artificial light is dull and cheerless and his spirits may be at their lowest ebb. But the Killer's head was high and his step light. He was thinking of the judge, and Midge, and Sandy, and the tired old men, of the job before him —a task she had called a man's work, and he was secretly a little proud of himself.

The instinct of a man who led a life of unceasing vigilance told him he was being watched, that danger lurked in every shadow, and that death dogged his trail. But he was merely stimulated by the threatening atmosphere, and strode on with eager celerity.

Wildcat trailed behind, not knowing what to expect, but hugging himself and hoping for the worst.

Nearing The Rio Grande, Brazos caught sight of his father staggering up to the door of Sandy Fraser's restaurant and rooming house, supported on either side by Sandy and another man, and followed by Midge. The gunman stopped abruptly in the light from a saloon window. She saw him and came hurriedly across the street. He stepped from the sidewalk into semi-darkness at a corner of the building and waited.

Midge's face was troubled. "Fent Scone swears he's going to hang you, Brazos, even if it takes an army to do it," she began without preliminaries. "He sent word to his different outfits to send in all the men they can spare."

Momentarily embarrassed by her concern, he stroked his chin and drawled, "Wouldn't be at all surprised."

Midge gripped his arm and shook it. "Don't be foolish! He finishes what he starts. You've got to get away from here!"

"B-but, Miss Midge, I—"

"Please! You can come back later." She clung to his arm and waited for an answer.

Brazos was at a loss for words.

Low in the eastern sky, the moon peeped timidly from the security of a black cloud and quickly disappeared. A bony hound appeared suddenly from nowhere, sniffed cautiously at the gunman's leg, tucked its tail, and padded swiftly and noiselessly away into the night. From down the street in the vicinity of the honkytonk, rolled a hoarse yell, tinny music, and a medley of rough and shrill voices. The town was tuning up to dance at his hanging . . .

No time to lose. Scone's men might arrive at any moment. If he could strike the first blow, it probably would upset the other fellow's plans for the time being. But he had to get rid of the girl.

"We're fixin' to slope pronto, Miss Midge," he told her softly. "Wildcat's got him a room at Sandy's. I'd be much obliged if you'll git our saddle-bags and truck and fetch 'em down to the kitchen.

We'll be there befo' you can say Jack Robinson."

The girl glanced at the old-timer hunkered down in a fringe of light a few yards away, his hard lips a straight line and his piercing eyes darting hither and yon. Her gaze ranged slowly over the towering figure before her, a man unbelievably calm and determined.

She shrugged helplessly. "Very well, Brazos. I'll go. Take care of yourself. We'll be waiting for you."

Brazos watched her walk away. In the middle of the street she hesitated, glanced back, and went on. Into the barren life of a wanderer had come a strange, heart-warming responsibility. A white-haired old dad and a gal with freckles on her nose, a-waitin' for him!

CHAPTER IV
"It's War!"

He walked rapidly, reaching the nearest open window at the corner of The Rio Grande without attracting the notice of loungers on the porch. But when he stepped boldly into the beam of light and paused there to accustom his eyes to the glare, they saw him and quickly passed the word inside.

The news speedily traveled the length and breadth of the large room. A wave of silence bore down on the crowd. Glasses settled back onto the bar. On the floor at the rear, dancers jerked apart, the men dropping nervous hands to their guns, the women staring with startled faces. Tilted chairs came down on all four legs with a jar. At tables along the walls, hands abandoned bottles and glasses, and slithered out of sight. The wheeze of the accordion and thump of the guitar stopped abruptly. The fiddler was drunk, and the fiddle wailed on.

Suddenly Brazos filled the door. The fiddle died with a plaintive screech, and the room held its breath.

"Plain suicide," thought more than one man, amazed at the killer's rashness.

A quick sidewise step placed the wall at his back. Thumbs hooked in his belts, he stood with the careless ease of a man who merely dropped in to kill time, having no apparent objective and nothing of importance on his mind.

His hard jaw, solid cheeks, and firm lips betrayed no feeling—no excitement, anxiety, fear, or hostility. In the face of a danger so great, such absolute composure was sublime insolence. It angered the crowd, and Fenton Scone took it as an insult. Seated at a table with Tobe and his three brothers, near an open window on the right, he stiffened in his chair and flashed the newcomer a look of consuming hatred.

And when Brazos spoke, he ground the insult in.

"Fent Scone," he began in a clear voice that everybody could hear, a voice as cool and unconcerned as his bearing, "I jest sorta moseyed by to tell you and yo' brothers to leave the country."

The cold, unhurried announcement struck the crowd like a breath out of the north. Doubting their own ears, men watched the Scones for confirmation of what they thought they heard.

The sheriff threw back his head and laughed uproariously, his heavy shoulders and paunch shaking with mirth.

"And the same thing goes for you, Tobe," drawled the Killer.

Ben sobered instantly. His wicked little eyes blinked rapidly several times.

Mumbling an oath, Wolf pulled his stupid gaze from Brazos and stared at Fent with dumb inquiry. Hank Scone's long face parted in a savage grin, and his hand crept toward the knife at the back of his belt. Stub's unblinking eyes were riveted with hypnotic fixity upon some selected point on the Killer's body.

The first shock of surprise having passed, Fenton leaned back in his chair with a haughty, contemptuous gesture, and regarded the speaker with a calculating gaze, as though suspecting a hidden motive behind the challenge. "Who sent you in here to make that fool talk?" he demanded levelly.

Brazos met his gaze in a calm and detached manner. "Nobody. I jest calc'lated it'd be the square thing to do," he drawled lazily.

Scone's voice reflected the confidence of a man who was sure of his ground. "I know you're a liar. You got more sense than to think the likes of you can run us out of this valley."

"Never did claim to be overly bright," answered the gunman in slightly bored fashion.

Everybody could see that Fent was preparing to enjoy himself, baiting a man whom he thought to be at his mercy. He was good looking and a smooth talker, and knew it. He had, besides, an admiring audience. "I'll gamble that whoever persuaded you to make this crazy play, figgered you'd start trouble and before we cut you down you'd get one of us—maybe me," he observed shrewdly. "Ain't that reasonable?"

Brazos answered so casually as to make his words ring true. "Nope. This here is my own pussonal jamboree. Course, if anything starts sudden-like, you'll stop lead fust off."

Fent lifted his eyebrows in mock dismay. "How soon do you want us to leave?" he inquired with heavy sarcasm.

From all outward signs, the gunman didn't know he was being made an object of ridicule. He replied in conversational tones: "Soon as ever you can sell out the stuff that rightly belongs to you. I've heard tell that you stole or jest took mighty nigh everything you got, so I reckon you won't need much time."

Scone's white teeth flashed in a wide grin, and he sent a droll glance at the spectators. "This ranny is shore good! Jest listen to him, fellers."

The Killer was languidly persistent. "Ain't you-all goin' to git out?" he drawled.

"No you damned fool! 'Course not!"

Brazos' shoulders sagged the merest fraction. His voice retained its colorless overtone, but into it crept a subtle note of savagery that sobered his listeners. "Figgered you wouldn't. And I'm kinda sorry you won't, 'cause killin's is so all-fired messy and onpleasant."

He meant business. Everybody could see it, yet no one could believe it. Twenty guns in that room were ready to leap from their holsters and send lead ripping through the stalwart man at the door. But they hesitated to do it.

It was the old story. One courageous man holding in check a gang of men who could easily destroy him. They were restrained by that primal instinct owned by man and beast, which engenders fear of the unknown.

Positive that he was no fool, they were convinced that he would not rashly expose himself to certain destruction. So he must know something they didn't know. Maybe shotguns and rifles lurked outside in the darkness . . . Each man swore the Killer was watching him personally, to the exclusion of everyone else. So each man waited for his neighbor to make the first hostile move.

But one of those present was driven by a more powerful emotion. He was a man who proudly filed notches in his guns. Unlike Brazos, he coveted the tributes paid to a killer. He looked upon the life of every man as a trophy . . . the more famously dangerous the man, the more desirable the trophy. Himself a killer, he envied another killer his place in the sun.

Stub Scone slid out of his chair and came around the table, lithe and noiseless as a cat . . .

Relief flashed across many faces. Stub would take him! Stub would cut him down. Stub took 'em all, big and little!

Sheriff Tobe pursed his thick lips, reared back in his chair, and hooked his thumbs in his vest.

Fent's eyes narrowed and his lips drew into a thin line. Keener than most, he had his doubts. For an instant he seemed at the point of laying a restraining hand on Stub's arm. Then he clenched his fist and sat still. An artery throbbed beneath the smooth skin of his throat.

Brazos wore the air of a cowhand going about his everyday work—confident, capable, and unhurried. He looked Stub over as he would a bronc he had to ride. He knew the breed. His reputation grew out of the killing of such men. He knew their tricks and could almost read their minds. Whether he'd stay in the saddle or roll in the dust for the last time, he didn't know. But he'd stick as long as he could.

Stub was a little different. He didn't look the other fellow in the eye as most of 'em did. Brazos imagined those lifeless eyes were riveted upon a spot about two inches above his britches — a feeling that should have made him uncomfortable, but it didn't. Lots of bad hosses had mean, fishy eyes. It was part of his job not to fear them.

And he spoke to Stub as he would to a vicious pony—soothing but firm:

"Better not try it, Scone."

Stub answered with almost no lip movement, "You git to hell outa here!"

A trick—starting his draw while talking!

Brazos sensed it. His right-hand gun spoke twice at the top of its holster . . . Then with more deliberation, it roared again from a higher level.

Unseen hands ripped and tore at Stub's belly as his gun struggled from its leather . . . An instant later, an unseen finger touched his forehead, leaving a spot of blue on the sallow skin.

Death claimed the slow man. A workmanlike killing, at once magnificent and appalling.

With Brazos' last shot, Wildcat's tremendous voice boomed, "Hallelujah!"

Every eye jerked toward its source. Framed in the window behind Tobe and the remaining Scones, was the upper half of the old-timer's body, and in either hand a gun was ready. "It's war! And I'm out for hair. Waugh!"

CHAPTER V
A Knife in the Dark

Wildcat's sudden appearance had served its purpose. Before anyone realized he had escaped, Brazos was half way across the street. Wildcat melted into the darkness with all the skill of a Pawnee horse thief.

Brazos arrived at Sandy's restaurant a few moments before Wildcat showed up at the back door. They were welcomed in the kitchen by Mrs. Fraser, a gentle, white-haired old lady who had brought some of Brazos' meals to the jail. Old Sandy was there, eager for news, and Judge Farnham, who had refused to go to bed, and sat surrounded by cushions in a rocking chair.

"Who was doin' the shootin', and where have you scalawags been all this time?" demanded the judge after an exchange of greetings.

Brazos essayed a weak smile. "Why, Jedge, we went down and took a look at our hosses, and . . ."

The door swung wide and Midge stumbled in. Her cheeks were colorless, but her eyes blazed. When she saw Brazos, she caught her breath and stared at him . . . "Why, you look as if nothing happened."

"Wa'n't nothin' much happened, Miss," he stammered.

She studied him with a look of mingled

bewilderment, disbelief, and astonishment. "Nothing much!" she half whispered.

Turning to the judge, she continued in a low voice, throbbing with emotion: "Oh, dad! I never saw anything like it! It was wonderful and . . . terrible!"

"Reckon it must've been, to upset you this way," drawled the judge humorously. "But what was it, Kitten?"

Midge sat on an arm of the old man's chair, gazing at Brazos as though he were some strange creature which she both admired and feared. "Do you know what he—what Brazos did?"

Farnham glanced from Midge to Brazos and shook his head.

Breathlessly she went on:

"He walked right into The Rio Grande, and in front of everybody told the Scones and Tobe to get out of the country! And, dad, he . . . killed Stub! Shot him three times before he could draw. The last shot right through the forehead! It was awful! Then Wildcat let out a terrible yell that scared everybody, and they both disappeared. I peeked through a window and saw it all."

Red lights flared up back of the judge's eyes. "Resky as the devil, Brazos! But a man's way, and it took a man to do it."

Brazos flushed and squirmed, robbed of speech by the unexpected praise. The girl's stare added to his confusion. She acted like she'd never seen him before. Afraid of him. Afraid he'd touch her. Afraid of a killer's bloody hands! Dammit! Couldn't she see he was jest doin' his job, like any other feller would?

Wildcat came to his rescue. "We gotta take our dust away from here, folks. So if Miz Fraser'll fix us 'bout ten dollars' wuth of ham and aigs while the Papoose gits into his moccasins, we'll be powerful thankful. Shuck them boots, boy! You got foot-work to do. Boots ain't good fixin's for a male human nohow. Every man oughta trap hisself a squaw jest to keep him in moccasins. 'Rapahoes is the best."

The judge grinned at Wildcat's sally, but Brazos was serious. He became busy with his boots and the moccasins he took from his saddle-bags. Toward Midge he assumed that air of aloofness which he habitually wore in the presence of those who treated him as a man to be feared.

During their hasty meal he asked Judge Farnham and Sandy a number of questions about the Scones and their organization. His attitude was that of a man seeking necessary information about work he had to do.

He made his inquiries in the same calm, impersonal manner in which a trail-boss might inquire about grazing, water, crossings, and quicksand on the trail ahead. His casual, matter-of-fact treatment of the undertaking had its effect upon the two old men, hard as they were. Their voices became unusually solemn.

The judge told how the Scones absorbed first one and then another smaller outfit, either by outright theft or by harassing owners until they sold for a song. Occasionally they had been forced to shoot a determined cowman.

"There's room in this valley for a million cows," he concluded, "and Fent Scone aims to have it and the cows to boot. He's got a mortgage on everything he hasn't grabbed. Owns the biggest saloons in town, and even went so far as to start a bank. It's the next building down the street. Josh Tinker runs it . . . an old batch, and a bloodsucker if the East ever foaled one!"

Judge Farnham leaned sidewise and pointed through a kitchen window. "You can see his light in back where he lives. Right now he's probably countin' the money that come in on the stage this evenin'.

"Scone is spread out powerful thin, coverin' so much territory," he continued, "so he had to make a loan from an Austin bank, puttin' up his mortgages as collateral. The Austin folks sent a man with the money and he's goin' to commence lookin' the stuff over tomorrow, takin' the paper back with him. This bein' a brand new county and not much on book-work, Scone hasn't recorded the mortgages but he told me Tinker will do it in the mawnin'. That's how I come to know about the loan."

The old man shifted in his chair, gritting his teeth to stifle a groan, and went on:

"When that there Austin feller leaves here, he'll jest as good as have my Box J outfit in his satchel. I had hopes for it, too. This trouble come just when we've found out a cow is worth a lot more'n the price of her hide, once you get her to Abilene. We've been hitchin' up our belts and starvin' for years, and now that No'thern markets offer the chance of a square meal, this damned outfit steps in and yanks it away from us. And there ain't many of us left to fight 'em."

Not many left. He looked terribly old and worn out. Brazos secretly thanked the dead horse-thief who led him to Buffalo Valley.

He pushed back his chair and inquired casually, "Got any other genuine bad hombres 'round here besides them Scones and Tobe?"

"Josh Tinker is as bad as any of 'em," growled Farnham. "He's got brains and no feelin's."

Just then the back door opened cautiously and one of the old jurors stuck his head in.

"Thought you-all might like to know that it won't be long befo' Scone starts the ball rollin'," he said. "He don't aim for these two fellers to git away none whatever. Men guardin' they hosses, men on the street to plug 'em if they try to steal hosses, and Hank hisself watchin' the back of this place." He disappeared without another word.

The information brought exclamations from everybody except Wildcat and Brazos. The judge declared grimly, "Reckon he's got you cornered, boys. Of course, Hank couldn't stop you, but he could make enough noise to bring the rest of 'em. The only thing to do is for me to send word to Jim at the Box J to round up as many men as he can find. We'll stand 'em off as long as we can."

Brazos arose and hitched up his belts. "Better not do it, Jedge," he advised quietly. "Might git a whole slew of good men killed."

Grinning down at the old man, he continued whimsically, "Why don't you kinda lazy 'round for a short spell, keepin' mo' or less onder kivver. You're sorta ganted up and saddle sore, so don't you fret no more'n you have to, 'cause you cain't never tell what'll happen."

Wildcat chimed in, "Fiddlesticks! Leave us be. We been in a heap tighter cawners than this'n and got out without losin' a patch of hide. Jest you watch us ramble when we're a-mind-to."

Judge Farnham was doubtful. "Well, maybe if you wait awhile you can sneak out and hoof it to the hills."

Brazos made a negative gesture. "Allus when fightin' a fella that's bigger'n me, I aim to hit fust and jest keep on a-hittin' so fast he cain't git hisself set."

"What you figger to do next?" inquired Sandy.

"Git our hosses and then clean that there bank!"

He didn't say it dramatically or with bravado. It might have been a simple statement that he was about to ride into big water at a flooded crossing, fully aware of the danger but treating it as part of the day's work.

The judge convulsively tried to rise, but sank back against the cushions shaking his head. Sandy made strange noises down in his throat. Midge bit her lip and her hands rolled into a hard knot. Ma Fraser raised and lowered her eyes quickly, and went on knitting placidly.

"Wonder where Hank Scone is hiding hisself?" mused Brazos.

Midge, Sandy, and Wildcat quickly volunteered to find out, but Mrs. Fraser objected.

"No, no! He'd be suspicious of you," she exclaimed. "Lawsy me! I'm skeerd half to death, but reckon I'll have to do it. Hank won't think nothin' of me putterin' 'round in the woodshed."

The old lady threw a shawl over her head. "Bless my soul! My heart's turnin' summersets," she twittered, reaching for a heavy butcher-knife.

And so she went out to do something she was afraid to do. But fear would not hold her back. . . .

"Gallopin' Grizzlies!" muttered Wildcat.

Presently she returned with an armful of wood, and the butcher-knife. "Oh my Good Lawd! It'll be days befo' my heart stops flutterin'! He's squattin' down behind that there pile of wood Sandy's been layin' off to cut for me. Go 'round the left end of the shed and you'll get within ten feet of him."

Brazos laid his guns down and put on his hat.

"Smart boy," applauded Ma Fraser. "No shootin' at this time of night . . . Wake somebody up."

He strode to the door and she stopped him. "Wait a minute, young man! You ain't so bright after all. Lemme dress you up."

Brazos halted and glanced sheepishly at Wildcat.

Heedless of the gunman's embarrassment, she took off his hat, threw the shawl over his head, and tied a long apron low around his hips. She stood back and inspected him proudly.

"There now! Bend yo' knees when you walk and you'd fool yo' own dear mother on a dark night like this'n. But you'd better pray that the moon don't come out."

Wildcat cackled in high glee. "I swan you're 'bout the size of a 'Rapaho squaw I had, and mighty nigh as purty. Big-Wife-Number-Three I called her, to keep from gittin' 'em mixed."

Brazos glared at the old-timer, and spoke softly to Sandy. "When I leave, I wish you'd say somethin' to me like I was Miz Fraser."

He went out, stooping and bending his knees, and Sandy called after him, "Wait a minute, Ma! I'll fetch in the balance of the wood."

The door closed behind him. For a moment no one made a sound. Listening, they lay tense, but heard nothing.

Wildcat sat hunched on his chair, a dreamy look in his eyes as he gazed at flames dancing behind a crack in the stove door. Presently he muttered retrospectively:

"And Lawdy! How Big-Wife could stew a Injun dog! Made it taste better'n hump ribs. Powerful fine fixin's."

Midge whirled on him and half-whispered fiercely:

"Joking! And he's out there killing . . . or getting killed!"

The old-timer wouldn't spare her a glance, but he answered with vast certainty:

"Him? Gittin' kilt? 'Tain't noways possible, Miss, 'cause the Papoose is packin' a mighty strong medicine, 'specially whar skinnin'-knives is consarned."

Hovering over the kitchen was an atmosphere of suspense from which Wildcat alone escaped. Judge Farnham sat rigidly, gazing through the window and gripping the arms of his chair, alert to catch the tiniest sound from outside. Sandy twisted his mustache nervously, staring at the door. Ma Fraser knitted desperately. Her face was calm, but from time to time she raised her head and the click of the needles stopped abruptly, then resumed with even greater vigor.

Reaching out timidly, Midge placed a hand on her arm. "Please, Grandma. Listen," she whispered huskily.

The needles fell silent. " 'Course I'll listen, honey."

At Sandy's back, mice scampered and squeaked behind the newspapers with which the room was papered. He slapped the wall with his hand. The tea-kettle sang a montonous dirge. Ma Fraser moved it to the back of the stove.

The noise of the town had dropped to a lower level. Midge strained her ears and her imagination ran wild. She saw the honkytonk crowd clustered around the bodies of Stub and Injun Sam, perfecting vengeful schemes. Her mind's eye penetrated the black depths beyond the window, and she saw two blacker figures struggling. A blade flashed, and she froze in her chair . . . A death cry!

"Damn that there houn' dawg of Joe Silbey's!" muttered Sandy.

Somewhere outside, feet scuffled through the grass—going from the rear toward the street!

Midge, Farnham, Sandy, and Ma listened with parted lips. Wildcat dreamed on . . .

At length the door swung open as noiselessly as though a ghost lifted the latch.

Brazos came in silently.

The shawl hung over one arm and the apron was wadded in his other hand. His hair was a turbulent yellow mass to which particles of dry bark, grass blades, and straw were clinging, and he was smeared with dust from head to foot. But his face was calm and his voice steady.

"Fella prowlin' 'round lookin' for Hank," he said easily. "Injuned down in the grass ontil he left."

"Did he find Hank?" asked Wildcat.

"Nope."

The Killer stepped to the stove, lifted a lid, and fed the apron to the flames. "Much obliged for the shawl, Miz Fraser. Sorry 'bout yo' apron."

"Never mind it, Sonny," softly answered Ma. "It could've been put to a worse use."

Brazos turned to pick up his hat and guns, and faced the light. There was a smear of blood along his chin.

"You're hurt!" exclaimed Midge, coming toward him. "Let's see."

His aloof bearing discouraged sympathy. She stopped.

"Huh! 'Tain't his'n," snorted Wildcat. "But I do smell skunk blood."

The gunman was ill at ease to the point of being brusque. "Let's go," he said to Wildcat. "We gotta move fast."

Striding to the door, he spoke over his shoulder. "So long, folks." He went out with the old-timer at his heels.

The girl walked to the window and peered fearfully at the woodshed.

The old men's glances met and clung . . .

"Three!" rumbled the judge.

"Three!" growled Sandy.

Ma Fraser's needles clicked on merrily.

CHAPTER VI
Call of the Lobo

Keeping well back from the main street, Brazos and Wildcat went cautiously but swiftly through isolated houses to the rear of the corral, which was situated at the end of the street on the outer edge of town. Soon they crouched

behind the shed housing the blacksmith shop and cubbyhole where the owner lived. Voices came from within.

Wildcat placed an ear against the boards. "Three fellas in thar," he whispered.

Brazos grunted something and led the way, worming under the bottom bar close to the end of the shed. Wildcat was close behind. The wind was wrong. Some loose ponies at the far end of the corral caught their scent or saw them, and one let out a snort that could have been heard through the town.

Not a second to waste. The door into the office stood open, and Brazos leaped along the wall toward it in the nick of time. A man stepped out. He dare take no chances, for one yell might prove fatal. A lightning blow with the barrel of his Colt sent the fellow down in a heap without a sound.

The next instant the Killer crouched in the door.

"Be still!" he growled in a voice demanding obedience, and his gun drove home the command. "One squeak, and we drill you and run for it!"

The two guards froze with hands at their holsters.

Wildcat slithered in with the speed of a weasel and jabbed his gun into the ribs of the nearest man. "On yo' belly," he snarled. "Down!"

Covered with dust, his beady eyes shooting sparks from within the shadow of his hat and his thin lips drawn back in a savage grin, the old-timer was a bloodthirsty object that discouraged argument. The fellow dropped to the floor. Wildcat disarmed him and quickly repeated the procedure with his companion.

He wanted to rap them over the heads to save trouble, but Brazos stopped him. "Nope. Might kill 'em. We'll stuff sacks in they mouths and tie 'em. Keep 'em still long enough."

The job was completed with the utmost haste. The squirming guards were tossed into empty mangers where they couldn't make too much noise. The senseless proprietor was dragged into a dark corner and left there untied.

The two raiders quickly saddled up. It took but a few moments longer to cinch on their pack saddle. Large leather *alforjas* carried their meager extra equipment with plenty of room to spare.

They boldly led their horses through the corral gate. At that moment when darkness was most desirable, the moon maliciously peeked from beneath the clouds. Brazos muttered a curse. Swinging into the saddle, he cast a glance down the street and cursed again. Everybody appeared to be heading for The Rio Grande.

Drifting through the moonlight like ominous shadows, floating through beams from doors and windows like grotesque creatures out of darker regions, men made their way in hilarious enthusiasm or grim silence toward the honkytonk. The dangerous significance of the situation instantly struck him.

Hank's body had been discovered!

The death of another brother had spurred Fenton Scone to action. In a matter of minutes that gang would pour out of the honkytonk an organized mob, savage as wasps, looking for them, with ropes to hang them!

They had to cross a hundred yards of open ground to reach the screen of buildings on the main street, and it had to be done slowly to avoid attracting attention.

Panic is a subtle malady that strikes without warning or favor. No man is im-

mune. Into the life of the bravest there comes a time when his courage falters, when his forehead is damp, although his entrails are knotted and frozen and his veins icy rivulets . . . when his reason dictates but one sane course—the wildest flight from impending danger.

While moving directly toward the jaws opening to receive him, Brazos was suddenly attacked by panic. Less than three months before, he watched a mob hang a man. The scene now flashed before his mind's eye, fearfully vivid in all its details.

They had strangled the wretched fellow. He kicked, and squirmed, and twisted, and the limb shook, and the waxy leaves twinkled and laughed in the moonlight, and his neck stretched, stretched, stretched!

As they passed a house on the right, the door opened and slammed and a slender figure ran toward the main street. A boyish voice called out, "Ain't you fellers goin' to the hangin'?"

Brazos disguised his tones and answered cheerfully: "Shore as shootin'! Wouldn't miss that!"

They continued leisurely onward to an adobe shed at the rear of the bank. Stepping off, they quickly led their animals inside and tied them there.

Carrying some sacks and moving with the speed of men in a desperate hurry, they darted like fleeting shadows to the back door of the building. It was closed, but light filtered through a red calico curtain at a window.

Leaving Wildcat there, Brazos crept beneath the window to the corner. A quick glance told him the sidewalk on the right was deserted for the moment. But diagonally across the street stood the jail and it was lighted. Through a window he made out Sheriff Tobe, lounging in a chair, giving the mob free rein.

Keeping well within the shadow, he ran lightly along the side of the bank to a window near its front. The room facing the street was dark, but moonlight streamed through a window on the opposite side and fell across a large safe. Its outer door and an inner compartment were open.

Brazos quickly rejoined Wildcat. "He's alone in thar," breathed the old-timer.

The gunman nodded briefly. "Watch the front, 'specially the calaboose," he whispered softly.

Wildcat slithered away. Brazos turned to the door and rapped sharply.

"Who's there?" a surly voice demanded.

"Tobe," he answered, knowing the pitch of the sheriff's voice resembled his.

Heavy feet crossed the floor and Brazos raised his gun to strike. Instead of opening slowly, the door swung wide. Startled, half blinded by the light, he missed the bald head at which he aimed the blow. His gun barrel raked the temple and jaw of a heavy, middle-aged man with a pointed face and thick neck.

Josh Tinker acted instantly. Slightly dazed, he nevertheless whipped out a knife and threw his broad bulk upon the gunman before he could strike again. Brazos dropped his Colt and they went to the ground together, the door swinging shut behind them.

In a flash he realized he had plunged into a desperate situation and was fighting for his life. As strong as a bull, Tinker was as quick and vicious as a badger.

Brazos caught the knife wrist with his left hand and wrapped his long, powerful legs around his antagonist's middle, clinching his left arm. Then he drove his right fist into the banker's chin. Like battering a longhorn's jaw! Lying on his side with leverage against him, he couldn't hold the knife arm with one hand.

Tinker suddenly turned his wrist and the blade opened a gash across Brazos' forearm. Another such slash might cut an artery or tendon! He had to get away.

Gripping the banker's arm with both hands, he jerked his legs loose and sprang

to his feet. The instant it was liberated, the knife struck with the speed of a rattler, ripping his shirt from side to side across his breast.

The Killer came up with his own knife in hand. The affair had to end. At any moment Tinker might yell and bring the mob down upon them.

His long right arm darted out. The glittering blade feinted at Tinker's throat. A downward blow with his left blocked the other's plunging knife. The steel whispered across the banker's stocky thigh, laying the flesh open to the bone. Then a lightning upward thrust, taught him by Wildcat.

Brazos stepped back. Joshua Tinker stiffened, straightened up on his toes. His head rose above its normal height. His eyes stared at the Killer's knife, his mouth opened. He was going to scream . . .

Brazos stepped in. Like an angry moonbeam, the blade flitted across the banker's throat. The scream died at birth, smothered in a burst of crimson spray, hissing from a severed windpipe!

A ragged chorus of yells arose at the other end of town. Brazos whirled like a snarling lobo at bay. Part of the mob had reached the corral. In a few moments their escape would be common knowledge. But damned if he'd run before this job was finished!

Snatching up the sacks, he slipped into the room. Evidently Tinker had been getting things in shape for the Austin banker. A table in the center of the floor was covered with books and papers, some neatly tied in bundles and marked "Notes," "Liens," and "Mortgages."

Brazos raced at his task. Into the sacks went every book and paper. Then he hurried into the bank proper. Bags of coin out of the safe. Silver, and some heavier ones that he knew held gold, he placed in a separate sack. A small compartment yielded a package of currency and more papers. He breathed easier. After all, he'd beat the mob.

Boots clumped on the porch and a fist hammered the door.

"Josh!" bellowed the sheriff's voice.

Kneeling before the safe, back to the door, head down, Brazos darted a glance under his arm toward a front window. Tobe peered through it. One locked drawer remained to be examined, and the gunman wouldn't leave until the job was finished. Just one thing to do. Shoot and trust to luck that the report attracted no attention outside.

Brazos set himself to whirl, then hesitated. A shadow crept into view behind the sheriff!

Like a giant black tarantula, it slid forward another yard. Suddenly it leaped upon Sheriff Tobe's back and fastened there. Two of its legs locked around his waist, another swept off his hat and buried itself in his hair, viciously jerking his head backward. A spidery arm seemed to brush across his throat . . .

Almost tenderly, the creature lowered Ben Tobe's limp body to the boards.

Brazos turned to his work more leisurely.

Wildcat came in while he was prying open the drawer with his knife. "Fair-to-middlin' job," said the gunman. "Jest a mite slow gittin' started. Skeerd?"

"Hell, no!" spat the old-timer. "Britches hung up on a nail. Damned nigh ruint me permanent."

Brazos chuckled. "Told anybody how to find our cache?"

"Sartinly, you durned idjit! The jedge and Gra'ma Fraser." Turning away he added, "Ramble due east and I'll ketch you."

"Where you goin'?"

"To git me some damages from Fent Scone. It war his nail," cheerfully lied Wildcat. He disappeared through the back door with the silence and speed of a night prowler.

After a final look around, Brazos went out leaving the light burning. At a corner of the building was the platform covering of a cistern. He cautiously lifted the trap-door, and the moon danced upon water a short distance below. Lowering the sack of coin, he sent it to the bottom with scarcely a splash.

Fenton Scone's money buried in his own cistern!

Wildcat's horse was gone. Brazos was untying the other two when the commotion arose. Stamping, curses, and yells on the bank porch. They had found Tobe. A moment later three shots sounded—the plainsman's signal for help. In no time the whole town would come boiling down upon him.

Where in hell was Wildcat?

He swung into the saddle with the lead rope in hand and rode slowly straight back from the shed, keeping it between him and the street. The horses had taken but a few paces before several men came tearing around toward the back of the bank.

The moon was too damned bright!

Brazos knew he could travel but a short distance further without being seen. They couldn't catch Red, but the pack horse was another matter. Yet he wouldn't abandon it with those books and papers. He'd fight.

The call of the lobo!

It came bursting out of the night on the far side of town. Penetrating and prolonged, rising above all other sounds. Savage and primitive, it gruesomely signified the death of an enemy.

Again it came, farther away, exultantly and defiantly announcing the death of a second enemy. The town listened with bated breath.

The dreadful tremolo faded and died in the distance.

Two enemies dead. Wildcat had killed one. Following a custom, a relic of Indian wars, he touched the other with his own hand, and thus to count two coups was his right.

Brazos grinned. The chase would go in the opposite direction. He rode away thinking cheerfully, "Joke's on Scone. A-playin' Injun with that slippery old cuss."

CHAPTER VII
Killer's Work Done

Off and on for three days, Brazos and Wildcat perched in the branches of a sycamore at the crest of a high point overlooking the valley. From there they watched bunches of riders sweep out from Buffalo City hot on their trail, "a-slidin' the groove," the old-timer called it, until they reached the rough country at the foot of the timbered hills.

At that point the trailers encountered results of the old-timer's skill at hiding sign—an art acquired in by-gone days when his "hair war tied to his brains." The elusive trail enticed the searchers everywhere except to the tiny box-canyon in which the fugitives and their horses rested peacefully.

Later than usual on the morning of the fourth day, they reached their lookout point and were surprised to discover no evidence of searching parties.

"Mighty pecooliar," observed Wildcat.

"Uh-huh," grunted Brazos, straddling a limb and leaning back against the tree-trunk. "And I got somethin' on my mind that's pecooliar, too."

"Spill it!"

"Yep. And you can tell me how come that there jury let me go," he demanded sternly. "It's 'bout the ninth time I've done asked you, and if you don't talk now, I'm a-heavin' you outa this here tree head-fust!"

"Jest move one leetle finger to tech me, and I slit yo' paunch fo' ways!" hissed Wildcat. Balancing on a large limb, he

crossed his legs Indian fashion and continued in normal tones:

"You nag wuss'n my Fat-Wife-Number-Two, so I reckon I'll have to tell you," he allowed. "Thinkin' no jury would dast let you go, them Scones and that thar mangy persecooter war a mite keerless, it 'pears to me. So the jedge got him seven fellas on the jury that had guts 'nuff to vote the way they feelin's p'inted."

"But how 'bout the other five?"

The old-timer grinned wisely. "Course you onderstand I ain't noways sartin, but some'res or other I heerd tell that them thar fellas war all on the Rangers' list of wanted men, and the jedge knowed it and they knowed he knowed it."

He paused to scratch under his chin, watching Brazos out of the corner of his eye. "Yes, sah! Very next time this hyar coon gits hisself tried for pree-medytated murder of a polecat, so-help-me, he's goin' to have that thar jedge trap him a jury!"

Brazos fixed his gaze upon the horizon. So that was the answer. The judge again. His dad! The judge knew law, and busted it wide open for him. It must've been tough on the old fella to do all them things he knowed he shouldn't do.

And for the hundredth time in the past three days, he swore he was a coward, runnin' away and leavin' his dad, Midge, Old Sandy, and Gran'ma Fraser to face the mob—his mob. Scone must be a wild man, what with his best men dead, and the Austin fella howlin' for his money or paper, and mebbe folks not so skeerd of him as they was. That gang was primed for a hangin', and he might turn 'em loose on the judge and Sandy. No tellin' *what* he might do.

Invisible hands clutched him, pulling, tugging, dragging him back to town. But he'd sworn he wouldn't kill any more than he had to. He hoped Scone would figger he was licked and run while he had a chance . . . Better give him 'nother day, jest to make shore.

Time passed, and he struggled with his problem in silence. Eventually Wildcat inquired softly:

"Talkin' to yo' medicine, Papoose?"

"Uh-huh."

"Calc'lated you war. Durned good idee. What'd it say?"

Brazos brushed a damp forehead. "It said, 'Go back to town.'"

The superstitious old-timer's eyes flashed. "Don't you never go contrarywise to yo' medicine!" He untangled his legs and started down. "Let's ramble."

The gunman sighed, and his gaze swept the horizon. A thin stream of dust was boiling across the valley!

Brazos pointed. "What d'you make outa that?"

The mountain man's far-sighted eyes quickly pierced the distance. "A woman, glued to a side-saddle, a-burnin' the breeze," he muttered grimly. "Be here time we git down the canyon."

Swaying in the saddle and hanging on desperately, the rider whipped around a timber screen as they ran toward it. The horse slid to a stop with feet spread and legs trembling.

Brazos caught her as she fell.

"Gran'ma Fraser!" he said through tight lips, instantly a prey to numerous fears. "Somethin's happened."

The old lady struggled for breath, and gasped, "Wh-what time is it?"

Wildcat glanced at the shadows. "Mighty nigh noon, I'd say."

She swept the hair back from her eyes, laid an unsteady hand on Brazos' arm, and took command of her voice. "Sonny, go now! And ride like you never rid befo'!"

"Where, Gran'ma?"

"Lawd! I forgot," she panted. "To the Box J. Fent Scone fooled everybody. Fooled Sandy and the other men we had watchin' him. They've gone up the valley.

He's crazy mad, and he's startin' to the Box J to make the jedge and Midge tell where are you. Mandy Bard's young'un heard him tellin' Wolf when they'd leave and what they'd do."

Levelling a quivering finger at a knob rising from the floor of the valley, she told him to go to its right and he'd see the Box J buildings.

"Fifteen mile if it's a rod, Sonny, and they're on they way with less'n ten mile to go!"

She dug her fingers into the gunman's arm, her motherly old eyes blazed fiercely, and she fairly hissed:

"You don't know Wolf, but I do! Even the honkytonk girls are skeerd of him. Take keer, Sonny. But hurry! Think of Wolf with his filthy paws on that pore chile and that devil Fent to egg him on! Sonny, you've simply got to ride like hell!"

Brazos rode . . . With hackamore only. No saddle or bridle added its weight to the flying beast.

Red went wild. Never before had he unleashed such reckless, horse-killing speed. Red knew he had a job to do!

At length the buildings came in sight. Horses in the yard!

Three miles to go.

But the giant horse had run himself out. At any moment his great heart might burst. Brazos knew it. He buried his face in the flowing mane and waited for it . . .

Two miles to go.

Red faltered. Brazos swore he couldn't make it . . . Wolf! . . . Midge! . . . He had to do it!

As though his master's emotions seared their way along his own delicate, high-strung nerves, Red tapped some hidden spring of energy and savagely hurled his mighty body across the prairie.

At last, three hundred yards back of the horse corral, a final desperate lunge. His legs crumpled. His velvety muzzle plowed the earth.

Red had finished his job!

Brazos hurtled through the air and lit on his moccasins. But his two hundred odd pounds drove his right foot into one of those damnable old badger-holes, partly sodded over. He crashed his length, came up immediately, and stared down in savage dismay. The toes of his foot pointed backwards!

He shot a glance at the house while running a hand down his thigh and shin. Below the knee something sharp raked his palm. He jerked up his pant leg.

Bone! His bone! A snag, thrusting its way through flesh and cloth.

He cursed it, and he cursed the twisted foot, and he gazed at the gray walls ahead. They had seemed to retreat, were a long ways off. But he had to get there!

Nothing to use for a crutch. Crawl and drag that damned foot? Wouldn't hurt as much, but too slow . . . So away he went in great, jarring hops.

Each time he hit the ground, streams of fire shot up his crippled leg. At length he lost his balance and fell on the splintered bone. Its pieces grated together. He heard them! He lay on his side. Pain devils dug their claws in his thigh and groin and ripped at his abdomen. Fiery lances probed his lungs and prodded his heart. Sweat streamed into his eyes and over his cheeks. He bit through his lips and blood ran down his chin.

His nerves were red-hot wires and his muscles knotted with pain. He couldn't get up! Then his mind's eye penetrated those adobe walls ahead, and fell upon a horrifying scene . . . He forced himself to get to his feet.

Between corral and wood shed he came upon the body of an old cowhand, gnarled fingers clutching a gun—too old to ride, but young enough to die for the outfit.

He almost envied the dead man, for he felt no pain. His job was done.

Sprawled across the kitchen step was a lanky body wearing a flour-sack apron. Dough on the hand that gripped a gun. Just the cook, but a man, too, who died for the outfit.

At last Brazos sagged against the wall by a side window in the front room. The world tumbled and whirled about him, and he seemed to have lost contact with earth. But a ruthless, driving will-power held him erect and cleared his blurring sight.

Fent Scone stood between a front door and window, facing the room. His thin features were gray and drawn. His large, piercing eyes flamed with an unnatural light. He was cruelty personified, a picture of insane rage.

Against the opposite wall lay the judge, bound hand and foot. His face was colorless, and his wide, staring eyes reflected the horror of what they saw.

As from a distance, his words reached Brazos' pain-deadened senses.

"I'll talk!" croaked Judge Farnham. His voice rose almost to a scream. "Stop him, man! By God, you can't stop him now! He's crazy! Shoot him!"

Brazos couldn't see all the room. Unmindful of the bones grating and grinding in his leg, he plunged along to the front porch and peered through a window.

Wolf Scone was dragging the struggling girl through the door to an adjoining room. She fought silently. One great paw ripped her blouse, and his nails gashed her soft skin. His little eyes had the red glare of an enraged boar's, and he slobbered and panted for breath.

Brazos dragged himself beneath the window toward the door. That infernal bone snag scraped the boards, caught and hung for an instant, and an overwhelming wave of darkness threatened to engulf him. But he ground his teeth and fought it back and reached the door.

With an agonizing effort he arose on his good leg and leaned against the wall. He knew that Fent Scone stood but a few feet beyond it. Exposing only his head and right shoulder, he snarled in a voice at once hoarse, terrible, inhuman:

"Wolf!"

The giant released Midge and she crumpled to the floor.

"Brazos, by God!" he blurted. Growling like a beast deprived of its prey, he waddled toward the gunman, one hairy arm extended as though to clutch him, the other hand clawing at his holster.

The Killer's lips parted in a ghastly grin. A slug ripped through the flesh beneath his arm. He brought out his gun. Wolf's shirt flared open to reveal the hair on his chest. With devilish care, Brazos drove a bullet there.

Wolf staggered, then came on with feet spraddled, firing wildly.

The Killer's deliberation was appalling. Like an artist proud of the delicate accuracy of his touch, he sped two more slugs in the path of the first.

Wolf crashed down. The house shook.

Shifting his guns, Brazos lurched at the door, stumbled, and plunged head-first to the floor. Both guns flew wide.

Fenton Scone didn't fire. In that brief instant he must have seen that the gunman was injured and decided to take him alive, for he leaped toward him and aimed a blow at his head. Brazos saw it coming, twisted, and the gun-barrel tore the skin on his forehead.

Fent launched another blow, and in a flash the gunman saw an opening. He swept an arm around his antagonist's legs and jerked him to the floor, and the gun clattered away.

Pain had temporarily banished all his human instincts, and made of Brazos a beast. He forgot his knife. He wanted to rip and tear and crush this thing with his hands!

Those hands were famous where he was known. Often they amused his companions with feats of strength. Long, sinuous fingers that clung like the legs of an octopus, or buried like the claws of an eagle. They ripped at Fent Scone's body like ravenous creatures.

Scone battered Brazos' splintered leg with his boots, tore his thighs with Mexican spurs, and rained blows on his unprotected face. But hands reached his throat, and their fingers bit through the soft skin of his neck.

Black fog rolled in gusts before Brazos' eyes. One moment he could only feel the convulsions of the throat in his hands. The next moment he gazed with startling clarity at the bloated face, protruding eyes, and bared teeth of the man he was slowly strangling to death . . .

A hand tugged at his shoulder, and his father's voice split the insane racket in his brain. "He's dead, Brazos!"

The fingers came away, hesitantly, reluctantly.

The Killer's work was done!

He crawled to the wall, and the judge helped him to sit up with his back against it.

Holding the remnants of her clothing about her shoulders, Midge timidly came toward him. Her face beamed. "Larry!" she murmured.

"Howdy, Sis," he answered bashfully.

Then he glanced up at the judge with a battered grin. "How're you, dad?"

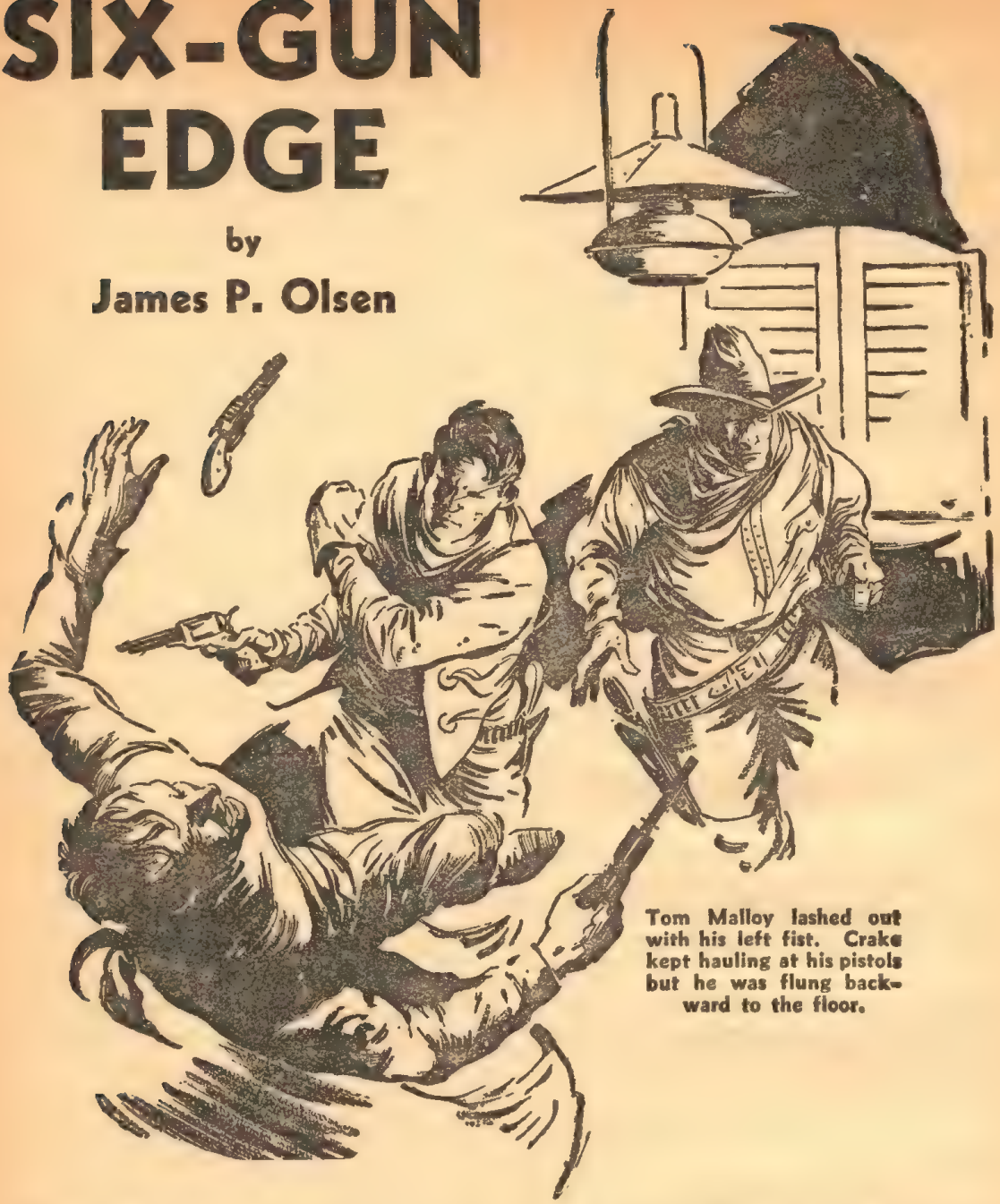
The old man leaned on the window sill, breathing hard. "Son, I knew it all the time," he faltered. "Told Midge this mornin'. Don't keep no secrets from her. You see, her dad was my friend. He's dead and so's all her folks, and I raised her from a kitten."

Brazos brushed a hand across his eyes. His gaze wandered slowly around the room, and back to Midge. He'd found a dad, a home, and lost a sister . . . But mebbe he'd found a leetle gal with freckles on her nose . . . He was damned tired, leg-weary . . . But there'd be no mo' driftin' . . . now . . . The job he set out to do was finished . . .

SIX-GUN EDGE

by

James P. Olsen



Tom Malloy lashed out with his left fist. Crake kept hauling at his pistols but he was flung backward to the floor.

The trails converged and made a road, and the road ran to the town of Thunder, a mile away. A mile of Devil's highway, for it ran right into Hell. Thunder was all of that.

Tom Malloy rode the trail that came from the northwest. Dan Sagamon came down the northeast lane. Neither had ever known the other, nor did either know the town of Thunder. But their meeting

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They Were An Odd Pair Of Hombres And Their Friendship Was As Strong As Their Smokepoles Were Fast, But There Came A Day When The Town Of Thunder Saw A Feud Between Them The Like Of Which It Never Saw Before . . .

with each other, and with the town, was to go down in the books, and to tally still more gun-smoked events on down the line.

Tom Malloy rode in first. A high, flat figure of a man in puncher's garb, dark and alert. Half an hour later, Dan Sagamon lazed along, the picture of a drifting cowhand going nowhere in particular. Of good size, tanned by wind and sun, sandy hair seeping carelessly from under his sombrero, he made a picture, too.

It seemed the very dust stirred up by the horses these two men rode, billowed uneasily.

Tom Malloy had a packhorse to attend, so he was just leaving the livery corral when Dan Sagamon pulled in. They exchanged a brief glance, a slight nod. Malloy stopped to roll a smoke, then swung off down the street. Lazily, a deceptive laziness, Sagamon strolled on a quarter of a block behind.

Tom Malloy's dark eyes scanned the town, took in the two blocks of wooden buildings, the few houses down small, short side streets. He saw a sign: THE DOG SALOON. He went quickly toward it, as though having an appointment that could not wait. It was his way.

Whistling carelessly, dolorously, Dan Sagamon surveyed the town leisurely as he strolled along. He, too, saw the sign. "Doggone!" he exclaimed and wiped his lips—but hurried not at all.

Inside the saloon, Malloy stood at the bar, downing two quick drinks. Sagamon came in and bellied up a few feet away. He ordered a bottle and drank from that, in long, slow gulps. He turned, then, and hooked an elbow on the bar. A sudden, portentous silence assailed the place. Here and there, a man moved quietly to leave.

A tall, thin man with a wolfish face had arisen from a table. He came determinedly toward the bar, and men moved aside, giving him, Wolf Crake, the regard his reputation called for.

Sagamon frowned heavily, and was given to more direct concentration when a man to his left stepped out and moved back between him and Tom Malloy. A smallish man with a waxed mustache and goatee, and with two big guns tied down. Sagamon disliked him instantly. Nor did he take to Wolf Crake.

Malloy, too, knew signs. Crake was drunk. He had, it was plain to the initiate, been drunk for quite some time. His eyes were bloodshot and his face blue-veined. But he was the sort who becomes more dangerous, more deadly when in such shape. He came straight toward Malloy, and the sudden prick of nerves at the pit of Malloy's stomach warned him instantly that Crake aimed to start trouble here and now.

He shouldered Malloy roughly and barked for a drink. When he'd had it, he turned on Malloy insolently.

"Stranger, what's your name, an' your business here?" he growled.

Malloy seemed to get white beneath the dark of his skin. Crake swelled. He mistook that sign for fear.

"I can't see," Malloy clipped his words, "that I'm called on to answer that. You run this town?"

"I run any town!" Crake boomed. "You heard of Wolf Crake? Well, I'm Wolf Crake." He eased back from Malloy. "An' when I say answer questions, I mean just that. Dammit, speak up!"

"Crake," Malloy said curtly, "your brand is plain. You've bluffed everybody here, and you are spoiling for a killing to keep them under your thumb. Yep, I have heard of you. A bluffing, loud-mouthed gun-notcher, who ought to be called Coyote, instead of Wolf. High-tail, you. I ain't hunting trouble. But you blab off at me, I'll beat your long ears down."

"Ride 'em, cowhand," Sagamon murmured admiringly. He stiffened instinctively then, watching.

Wolf Crake rocked on his heels, unbelief mirrored on his face. With a wolfish snarl, he dropped his hands to the pair of guns he wore.

Tom Malloy lashed out with his left fist, smashing Crake's nose flat. Crake gurgled, stumbled, kept hauling at his pistols. Malloy's weapon was clear of the holster now. He barely lifted it, elbow hugged close to his ribs. There was no waste motion here. The roar of the heavy .45 rolled throughout the saloon, and Crake was flung backward and to the floor.

The smallish man who had stepped between Sagamon and Malloy stepped out from the bar. He drew one gun. And so did Sagamon. He matched speed with the little one, outmatched him. Sagamon reached with his free hand and spun the other about.

"Stop 'er!" he spat. "Stop, or I'll—A'right!"

His gun lashed throatily, though not so heavily as had Malloy's. Sagamon liked a .38 to do his cutting with. The small man drew into himself with a bawl of crazed pain, pawed another gun from the holster and backed away from Sagamon. Head canted to the left, Sagamon watched him with deep, concentrated interest, then let the arched hammer of his gun drop down again.

The little man sat down flat, the backs of his hands on the floor, the fingers curled. Blood ran down both shattered arms. The big body of Wolf Crake rolled and, dragging his left leg, he crawled blindly toward the door, leaving a little smeared trail from the hip that was smashed; that would cripple him forever, as his partner, Doc Riego, would be always crippled.

Tom Malloy looked left and right in that quick way he had. He turned toward Dan Sagamon. Behind the bar, Slim Crenshaw, the bartender, watched this swift survey.

"Them two ain't got no friends in here," he volunteered. "But look sharp. Carp Hershot'll be coming any time."

Malloy nodded and stepped up to Sagamon. "Thanks," he said. "Reckon the whiskered one would've got me . . ."

"Tote these two out to the sawbones!" Slim Crenshaw's voice drowned what else Malloy had to say.

Malloy and Sagamon stood there, then, that oddly assorted pair, and each measured the other. Each found a lot he liked. Some mutual feeling drew their hands up and they shook. That was the beginning of the friendship between the pair—a friendship that would cause each to part with his last cigarette, last dollar, his very life for the other one, if need be.

The batwing doors of the saloon slammed inward and a big, fish-faced man rushed in, a chinless, milky-eyed hombre wheeling along at his heels. "Carp" Hershot, the marshal, and Tice Kerm, his deputy.

There was no love lost between this pair and the two that Malloy and Sagamon had crippled until they'd never ride gun again. Yet Hershot was on the point of exploding. Any two gunsmokeroos good enough to get Doc Riego and Wolf Crake, would be a threat to him. After all, a sort of tacit truce had existed between Hershot and Crake—Crake didn't step on Hershot's toes, and Hershot always could find excuse to let Wolf Crake alone.

Slim Crenshaw explained the thing as it had happened. Hershot turned savagely on Malloy and Sagamon.

"Come in almost the same time," he clipped out. "Yet you never saw each other before, never knowed each other. And you team up to kill two of our citizens. Well, you might as well have killed them."

"I ain't standin' by to see a li'l buzzard shoot a man in the back," Sagamon drawled, his blue eyes frosty. "An' I reckon it is good we didn't kill them two outright. Good for *you*. You might've

thought to arrest us . . . an' that would have been a foolish thing."

"You threatenin' me?" Hershot snarled.

"He's telling you," Malloy snapped. "I'm backing any word and every word he says. And I wouldn't go calling anybody a liar. We never met before. But I got a hunch . . ."

Hershot glared his hate. And a full measure of fear and insecurity was his. These men were a menace. A menace to his gun rule over Thunder.

"And I got a hunch you two better drift on," he snarled. He turned on his heel and walked out, Tice Kerm at his heels.

"Hope you'll like Thunder, you two," Slim Crenshaw said, setting out the drinks. He grinned hugely. "I'm staking 'er you gents wouldn't leave *now*, even if you hadn't aimed at sticking on."

Malloy and Sagamon regarded each other gravely, looked at Slim and raised their drinks.

"To a nice stay in Thunder," Malloy proposed.

"How," said Sagamon.

They moved into a shack at the edge of town that afternoon. And it seemed they had always been friends, so easily did they cotton to each other's ways. The feeling between them was deep; the sort of feeling that makes a man come a million miles to be at the side of another when trouble comes.

"Me," said Sagamon, when they'd eaten and rolled smokes, "I was fixin' to rest up a bit, nohow. I got a li'l of my summer's wages left, an' no place to go. An' shucks, a man can't live without excitement. It's goin' to be interestin', steppin' on this Carp Hershot's toes."

"Same here," Malloy agreed. "I got some dinero left from a bunch of wild broomies I run down, back up north. We'll stop and live like gents awhile, and then we'll mosey on."

Sagamon nodded comfortably. Their plans included each other now. Right then, each figured they always would include each other in any plans that they might make.

In the month that followed, Thunder watched events with growing interest. Watched the growing, dark restlessness of Carp Hershot, and the mocking way Malloy and Sagamon always looked at him. They were not in Thunder of days much, now. They had a job breaking a saddle string for a big outfit to the east of town, and came in only at night.

Top hands, ace bronc-snappers, both of them. Each using his own methods and gently hoorawing the other about everything he used and did. They argued about guns, riding gear, clothes, liquor. Their friendship grew.

And Carp Hershot's hate for them also grew. He sensed that, sooner or later, there would be a play between them. One alone, he would have dared, perhaps. Together, he feared them. And Thunder was laughing up its sleeve at him. He had told them to drift, and they had laughed at him, and continued to mock him. Hershot was rapidly losing prestige in the town.

And then, things happened all at once. Started the afternoon Malloy and Sagamon got paid off for breaking the saddle string and came into The Dog with a craving for a poker game. They teamed up at a table, and in three hours, had a disgusted houseman pushing back his chair.

"I can't beat such hoorawing and playing," he declared. "You ought to make a business out of it."

"And somebody would catch up with them, and make buzzard meat out of them!"

The gambler sneered at the speaker. Malloy and Sagamon acted almost as one. It was Tice Kerm, sweating the game, who had spoken. Sagamon grabbed the gun Hershot's deputy had half drawn. Malloy

twisted Kerm's arms behind his back and held him face-down across his knees.

A wide grin on his face, Sagamon commenced working over Tice Kerm's saddle-sides with the barrel of Kerm's own gun. And when they had finished, Sagamon lifted Kerm off Malloy's lap, turned him, pushed him. Malloy took aim and kicked —hard! Kerm went sailing outside, wailing curses and threats, to end up on his face in the dust of the street.

Slim Crenshaw reached for his private bottle and set up a drink.

"But if I was you boys," he seriously advised, "I wouldn't hold Hershot and Kerm too light. Hershot is smarting under a lot of hoorawing because you fellas are still here. And Tice Kerm has killed his man, several times over . . . even if he did mess up their *backs.*"

Sagamon pursed his lips and nodded slowly. He and Malloy knew Slim Crenshaw spoke the truth.

"Just the same," Malloy said, "the working over we gave him got me up an appetite for town food. Dan, let's try that restaurant down the street."

"Best ride careful there," Slim put in with one of his frequent, well meant warnings. "Marlia Vane, who works there, has just returned from a trip back east. I think she was in Kansas City. That woman is dangerous as a loco brawnk. And Carp Hershot thinks she is his own personal property."

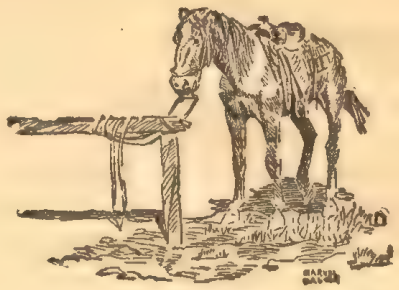
"Wimmen," Sagamon drawled, "ain't part of our gear. C'mon, Tom, an' don't fall for no female wiles."

"Go to hell," Malloy growled, swinging a fist at Sagamon.

They went into the little café a half block down the street. Marlia Vane came from the kitchen. And Sagamon's head jerked, his hat falling to the floor. Malloy gave a hitch on the stool and leaned half across the counter.

Marlia Vane posed, put slender hands to her pile of yellow hair and widened her big, violet eyes. Her look was teasing, inviting.

They were unaware of Carp Hershot stopping outside and glaring in through the



door. Tice Kerm, limping, let one hand fall to his pistol. Hershot swung an arm backward and gave Kerm a shove. He didn't aim to tackle this pair while they were together. But the concentrated look of cunning that twisted his fishy face bespoke some deep, dark plan.

That night, Sagamon returned to the café. And walked home with Marlia Vane, to the little house she occupied on a short side street. The next afternoon, Tom Malloy took her riding. That night, Sagamon took her home again. Sagamon and Malloy each made excuses to the other. Time went on, and, as was inevitable, the day came when they had to break.

"Look here," Malloy said one night when Sagamon came in. "You ain't got serious feelings toward Marlia. Why don't you step out?"

Sagamon eased onto a bench and stared levelly at Malloy.

"We'd best get this straight, friend Tom," he growled. "We been dodgin' and lyin'. An' I'm tired of it. They's been bad feelin' between us for two weeks, now. I reckon we made a mistake. So don't sit there an' tell me how I feel, an' what to do!"

"You stay away from her or . . ."

"What?" Sagamon snarled. They leaned toward each other, their manner harsh, threatening.

"I'll blow you apart!" snarled Malloy.

"You ain't done nothin' until you do," Sagamon answered.

He arose, gathered up his doofunnies, spilled them in his warsack and left the cabin. He went to the roach and rat infested hotel and got himself a room.

It took Thunder but half a day to know there was a feud between the pair. their actions, when they met in The Dog, fairly shouted of a split-up. They used opposite ends of the bar, they stared pointedly at each other, they walked wide when they passed.

And Thunder guessed right. Marlia Vane. She was giving the hips, the eyes, the baby stuff to both of these men. One thing that a few in Thunder knew, but could not, dared not tell these two—Hershot was still another in the string of Marlia Vane's admirers. Malloy and Sagamon never knew of his visits at the girl's home.

He came late at night, after Sagamon or Malloy had gone. And the last visit was one when he told Marlia Vane many things. She listened, the baby look absent, a certain hardness to her features that Malloy and Sagamon had never seen —partly because they had never looked close enough.

The next afternoon, Marlia rode out with Malloy. Her usual gay, teasing manner was absent. Malloy rode close to her and tried to capture one hand.

"Don't," she begged.

"There's something worrying you," Malloy stated. "Ain't I got the right to know what it is?"

"You have," she wailed. "But I'm afraid to tell you. Afraid for you."

"Tell me—now," he commanded.

"It—it's Sagamon," she half-sobbed. "Oh, Tom, I'm afraid of him. He's too impetuous. And I'm afraid to tell him to stay away."

"I'll tell him," Malloy snarled. "I'll do more than that. Damn him," his voice rose, "I'll put him where he can't bother you no more."

"No," she begged. "He'll kill you, Tom. He'll shoot you. And then where would I be?"

He was like a small boy, then, and his pride was flicked.

"Him, shoot me?" he snarled. "You'll learn different. Come on, Marlia. I've lost taste for this ride. Let's go back to town. They's something boiling inside of me, and I got to let it out."

She leaned in the saddle and kissed him quickly. "Careful, my dear," she sobbed.

Grimly Malloy walked down the main street when they got back to Thunder. Sagamon was lounging in front of the feed store, swapping lies with a group of loungers there. He remarked the hard, direct sound of Malloy's footsteps, looked up, and then rose slowly from the bale of hay on which he sat.

"I want a word with you!" Malloy snarled.

"Friend Tom, they ain't nothin' you got to say to me that'll take a private hearin'," Sagamon sneered.

"Then take it here!" Malloy barked. "I'm warning you for the last time. You stay clean away from Marlia Vane. Fact of it is, you'd best get clean out of town. I ain't warning you no more. If you needs another, you'll get it from this." He patted the gun he wore.

Sagamon didn't speak for what seemed an interminable minute. None of the hearers stirred. Sagamon's lips curled and the frosty glitter was in his eyes.

"You . . . warnin' me," he snarled. "Tellin' me to clear town. A'right, Mister Malloy, you've gone too far. You can quit Thunder. An' the faster you roll your tail, better it's goin' to be for you."

"You want it now?" Malloy spat.

"You never can give 'er to me," Sagaman jeered. "I'll give you your chance to back down. Tonight, when she's dark,

you sneak like the dog you are. Come daylight tomorrow, you best be, along with your warnin's, a helluva long ways off."

"At sunup, come tomorrow, I'll walk up this street, Sagamon," Malloy gave back. "And I better not find *you* here."

He spun on one heel and walked rapidly away.

A grim tensity picked Thunder up in icy hands and held it in breathlessness. And when the word was carried to Carp Hershot, he merely grinned hellishly and shrugged.

Evening came. Malloy stood at one end of the bar in The Dog. Staring into each drink before he downed it, Sagamon stood at the other end. They studiousy avoided each other's eyes. And each was thinking, each hoping . . .

Sagamon was thinking of the days when he and Malloy had been such friends. And he was puzzled. Casting back, he hardly knew how this situation had come about. Yet Malloy, damn him, couldn't get on with passing his warnings out. Sagamon wondered if he would get Malloy. Would Malloy get him? Or would they blast each other down?

And Malloy was wondering this, and also hoping Sagamon would go. He knew he wouldn't. He fanned his hate against his erstwhile partner by reminding himself that Sagamon stood between himself and Marlia Vane. She was afraid of Sagamon.

The night came on, and the hours of darkness ran swiftly. Swiftly to Sagamon and Malloy, dragging to the men who crowded the saloon, and who would not go home until the sun had risen.

Sagamon looked at his dollar watch and walked out of the saloon. He found Marlia Vane waiting for him, and took her home.

She begged him not to fight Malloy, saying she was afraid for Sagamon. And then she kissed Sagamon and wished him luck. He went out slowly, sensing something amiss, something he could not put mind or finger on. Thoughts of Marlia ran in and out of him, messing things all up.

He went to sit on a bit of old rail fence across the road from her house. An hour passed. Dust-muffled footsteps sounded in the road. Marlia Vane's door opened, light came out in a wobbly square, and Sagamon started. Malloy was silhouetted in the doorway, then went on inside.

Puzzled, Sagamon went across the road and around to a side window.

Voices came plainly. Malloy was holding Marlia Vane in his arms, and she was wishing him luck on the morrow. Almost the same words and actions as she had used on Sagamon!

Deep, puzzled creases dented Sagamon's brow. He went back across the road, sat on the fence and gave himself up to slow and ponderous thought. While he sat there, Malloy came out. Sagamon stiffened, then sat still in the darkness. Malloy came to lean against the fence a number of yards away.

A dark figure moved stealthily down the road. And again Marlia Vane's door opened, and Sagamon and Malloy saw Carp Hershot go inside. Sagamon grinned slowly and felt a great weight lift off his chest.

"Tom," he called.

Malloy stiffened and there was the sound of his palm hitting leather.

"Hold 'er, Tom," Sagamon warned, ambling toward Malloy. "We got somethin' to talk about, you an' me. First, let's play mean, an' ease over an' see what Carp Hershot is doin' there. Y'see, Tom, I was the first visitor there tonight. I was told the same things you was. Now, let's you an' me see . . ."

They went back to the side window. Malloy was still hard-faced, wondering. Sagamon's face revealed a 'possum grin,

Hershot's triumphant, jeering voice came through the thin walls:

"And when one of them gets the other . . ."

It was gray dawn, and then purple cast the eastern horizon. The first red bit of the sun made its sudden appearance.

Faces were at windows, doors. A few heads were visible over the edges of building roofs. A figure appeared at the south end of the street. Sagamon. Almost instantly, Malloy stepped out from the northern end. Their faces were set and bleak.

The doors of The Dog moved gently and Carp Hershot stepped out and pressed back in the shallow doorway. Across the street, the door of the barber shop opened and Tice Kerm stood there.

Step by step, deliberately, in a terribly deadly way, Sagamon and Malloy came on. Their guns were in their hands.

Thirty yards, twenty, ten. They stopped. Sagamon's voice snarled a rumbling note.

"When you're ready, you fool!"

Malloy drew a long, great breath.

"Now!" he barked.

Their arms swung upward, but Malloy's arm leveled first. The hammer of his gun fell and gun sound boomed into the morning quiet.

Sagamon rocked, staggered, went down to his knees. As he fell, he half turned, facing the saloon. Malloy had no eyes for Sagamon. He turned toward the barber shop, his gun starting to talk of sudden death once more.

On his knees, the feigned look of pain now gone, Sagamon was working gun himself. The whipping rap of it ran against the duller pound of Malloy's .45.

Gun spinning from his hand, Carp Hershot moved from the saloon doorway. His head jerked limply, his arms flopped, and of a sudden his legs went rubbery. He piled in a skidding heap, came to a stop with his face buried in the deep dust, twitched once and lay still.

Across the street, Tice Kerm lay half in, half out of the barber shop. His feet beat the walk as the life ran swiftly out of him. And then he, too, was silent.

Sagamon rose slowly as Malloy came to meet him. There was a tight, strained expression on the face of each. Now, it gave way to a smile. They met, looked a bit shame-faced at first, and then clapped each other on the back. Together they went into The Dog.

"So he was fixed to kill the one that was left," Slim Crenshaw said, putting his private bottle out. "Dirty dogs. Might have knowed they'd rig up one like that. It's a happy day for Thunder, I'd tell a man."

"We'd tell a man it's happier for us," Malloy replied.

They drank. Sagamon threw down coin. "Couple of quarts. Reckon that'll hold us on the trail."

"Wait," Slim Crenshaw called, as Malloy and Sagamon started rolling from the saloon. "You hairpins found out you was bein' blind-rigged, and give it back fine style. But that don't settle which one is going to get Marlia Vane."

"Oh, we settled that," Sagamon said over one shoulder. He winked at Malloy. "Yep, Slim, she's settled. We tossed a coin for the lady's affections, y'see."

"Yeah?" said Slim with great interest. "And which one won?"

"It's like this, Slim," said Sagamon. "We tossed out there in the middle of the street. Y'know how deep the dust is there? Well, we flipped the coin. I called heads, an' Tom called tails."

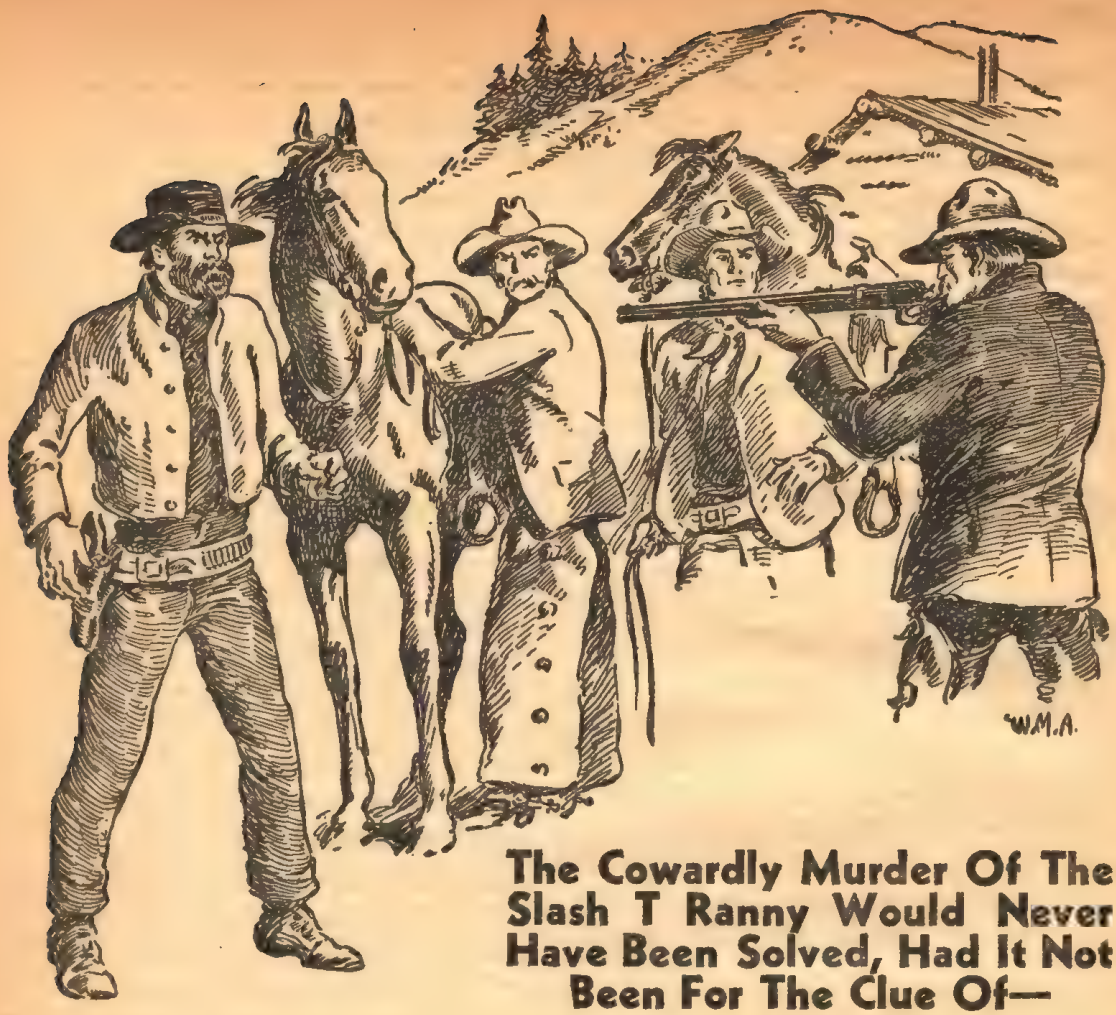
They were moving on as Sagamon talked.

"Who won?" Slim asked impatiently.

"Well, in that dust, friend Slim, would you believe 'er—that coin stood on edge!"

Slim gulped, cursed softly, then grinned. Horses' hoofs sounded from outside.

Dan Sagamon and Tom Malloy had gone, taking their lucky coin with them.



The Cowardly Murder Of The Slash T Ranny Would Never Have Been Solved, Had It Not Been For The Clue Of—

A Greased Saddle

by

STEPHEN PAYNE

In twenty years as foreman for the Slash T outfit, Dick Ahern had seen many hands come and go. A keen judge of horses, of cattle and of men, his mild gray eyes in his leathery and deeply lined old face told him much. His intuition told him even more.

And so he believed the boss was making a mistake in sending young Harry Strickland to the Flag Bar ranch to bring home the cash payment due on five hundred steers which the Slash T had sold to McGillicuddy of the Flag Bar the previous fall.

Young Strickland was as honest as the day was long, Ahern knew. But he lacked experience. Of a trusting nature, the kid simply couldn't keep anything to himself. This was his biggest fault.

When the boss told him he'd been elected to go for the money, he sensed the responsibility of the job. He must be standing high with Martin De Witt, he proudly told the bunkhouse.

Whereupon old Dick Ahern, worried and feeling responsible himself, took Kid Strickland aside and cautioned him to keep his lips buttoned and be doggoned careful.

"Ten thousand bucks is a powerful lot of money, younker. Losin' it would sure put a crimp in the old man."

Strickland said he knew it. "But you're an ol' fraidy cat or somethin', scairt of yore shadow. There ain't no bandits, no rustlers in this neck of the woods. I'll be back tomorrow night, all jake."

And Kid Strickland rode away on his forty mile jaunt across the mountain range. Rode away with his brand new Stetson set at a jaunty angle, his red sleeve holders and red neckerchief screaming at the vast rangeland and his new saddle singing a song of squeaking leather.

The following day De Witt stayed up until midnight waiting for the return of his responsible messenger. During the next day the old rancher anxiously scanned the gray-green foothills and the massive mountains for a lone horseman to appear. Sunset's magic brush painted all the jagged skyline. Twilight faded to darkness and out came the twinkling stars. Still Kid Strickland had not come.

Dick Ahern joined his boss, saying no word, simply watching the wizened old-timer stare off into the night. Finally De Witt shrugged. "Oh, well, he's only one day overdue," he said.

"It's twenty-four hours too many," commented the grizzled foreman. "Better I go see about it?"

"No hurry. Perhaps McGillicuddy didn't have the payment ready. Not so easy for him to dig up ten thousand dollars. If it had been, he'd have bought them steers outright last fall, 'stead of payin' me five thousand down and the balance in six months."

But by sunrise the following morning Martin De Witt decided he had waited long enough. Much too long, Dick Ahern thought. The boss was going alone to investigate and when his old foreman loped up alongside him, he snorted:

"You think I need a nurse? Go back and set the rannies t'work."

"I put 'em t'work, Martin."

"Well, get to work yourself."

"I'm goin' with you."

Wrathfully De Witt glared at Dick Ahern. "If you hadn't been with me twenty years, darned if I wouldn't fire you. . . . Who's runnin' this outfit?"

Properly ignoring this, Ahern rode ahead of the rancher, who spurred up beside him and said bluntly:

"Dick, I've put up with a heap from you, off and on. Yeah, when I look back, there's been many a time when you've taken the reins right out of my hands and run things as if I was only the chore boy. I'm all fed up on that sort of stuff. Turn your nag around and head for home now!"

Dick Ahern flushed, replying coolly, "You can't stop me from ridin' with you whether you like it or not. I got a hunch there's been ugly work along the trail."

"To the blazes with you and your hunches, you ol' mossyhorn. You're fired!"

"Guess we'll have to get that ten thousand smackers afore you can pay me off," drawled Ahern, refusing to get mad.

De Witt lapsed into a sort of thunderous silence. The two old cowmen, who really had a great affection for each other, silently climbed up the eastern side of the mountain range. They splashed across streams swollen by melting snow, and finally came to the Big Spider, the largest river of them all.

Sundown found them at the Flag Bar ranch on the western slope. The riders had not seen young Strickland, nor had they found the tracks of his saddle horse.

McGillicuddy, his family and his hands, were eating supper. Hearing horses, the rancher himself appeared at the door of his log house, wiping his gray mustache and bushy beard with his bandana.

"'Lo, Martin," he greeted with surprise. "What brings you here? 'Course I'm

darned glad to see you and Dick. Light off and . . ."

"Come here, Bob," ordered De Witt shortly. Lowering his voice, he asked, "My man arrived, didn't he? He got the . . ."

"Shore, he came, a blond young fella, said his name was Strickland. He gave me your letter and I gave him the jack. What's wrong?"

"Plenty," answered Dick Ahern laconically.

De Witt's old face turned gray. He choked, "And where'd Strickland go?"

"Headed out on a short cut, a cow trail runnin' around the south side of Shadow Mountain."

"Who told him 'bout that short cut?" Ahern asked quickly.

"I didn't," said McGillicuddy now equally as worried as the cowman and his foreman. "Let me see. This young cowpuncher was asking the boys if a fellow could get through by that short cut all jake. Where he'd heard about it I don't know." He frowned and continued:

"The boys told him 'twas a tolerable good trail. He shore hadn't ought to have got lost on it. Darned funny he ain't showed up. Seemed like a nice kid, sorta swell-headed like one his age should be and powerful proud of his outfit. I rec'lect he sat up after the rannies had hit the hay a-greasin' his new saddle."

"Greasin' his saddle," muttered Dick Ahern. "What with?"

"What the blazes does it matter, Dick?" snapped De Witt. "The doggoned kid, has he gone crooked?"

"Why, the women folks had churned a big batch of fresh butter," McGillicuddy answered Ahern. "Seems this Strickland boy had learned unsalted butter was swell to use on new leather. Anyhow he asked Ma and my daughter for a hunk of it like I was sayin' . . ."

"Can we follow that short cut trail now, after dark?" De Witt cut in impatiently.

"We-el, yes. But I never yet seen a man who could find tracks in the dark. Stable your horses, men, and come in to supper. We'll get movin' at crack of day. That's the best we can do."

To this the fretting De Witt reluctantly agreed. But he and his old foreman were moving long before daylight.

No one was astir on McGillicuddy's Flag Bar ranch when the two old hands rode out, by the light of the morning star, on the short cut.

"In a case of this kind where you don't know who to trust," said De Witt, "it'll be just as well not to have McGillicuddy along. It might be—just might be—to his interest to lead us on a wild goose chase."

Dick Ahern shrugged and said nothing. Whereupon the rancher continued in a brittle voice:

"I kinder forgot I'd fired you and wasn't goin' to talk to you no more . . . You figger McGillicuddy's in on it or you figger the temptation was too big for that kid and he up and lit a shuck?"

"Either of them suppositions is just theories," said Ahern and dismounted to look closely at tracks on the narrow trail winding up along a valley. "Young Strickland rode this way sho" nuff and alone, for the only tracks I can see was left by his hoss. Iffen he kept ridin' he's got a full three days' lead on us, boss . . . I wish we'd stopped long enough to down a pint of strong java this mornin'."

"Humph! Let's ramble faster," snapped De Witt.

Climbing steadily, they topped out on a wind blown ridge, then skirted around the southern side of Shadow Mountain. The tell-tale tracks of Strickland's pony led across a crevasse, filled with snow that was as hard as ice.

Ahead of the two riders lay a mighty area of timbered reaches, open parks showing the first green of spring, deep gulches, higher peaks rising abruptly above the lesser ridges. Lakes and snow banks glis-

tened in the rays of the early morning sun, a dark gash marking the canyon of Big Spider River, flowing southward.

"Brrr! Sure cold up here, top o' the world," complained De Witt. "Spring comes late, but you can bet old Spider's roarin', bank full."

To the rear sounded the ringing thud of hoofs. A minute later McGillicuddy hove in sight astride a panting steaming horse.

De Witt swore, then sputtered, "Is he so darned anxious to find out what we'll learn that he had to trail us?"

"Why didn't you fellers wake me? Why didn't you wait for breakfast?" demanded McGillicuddy. "What have you found?"

"Nothin' yet," said De Witt shortly.

Dick Ahern was loping onward toward a small spruce thicket. Veering slightly to go around it, the foreman suddenly lifted his bridle hand. Near the trees on the hard ground lay a human body.

In a queer tight voice Ahern spoke to the men behind him:

"We've found Kid Strickland—dead! Keep back. I want to cut for sign."

As he swung off he heard both ranchers gasp with astonishment. But his request went unheeded. In a moment they also were looking for sign. Tracks told a plain story of what had happened.

A man had lain in wait among the trees. From cover he had shot young Strickland as he was riding past the grove. The kid's horse had carried him not over fifteen feet before the rider keeled out of his saddle, and the assassin had caught the horse before looking at the fallen cowboy.

Obviously the man had searched the kid, but had taken no article of his attire. Strickland's big silver mounted spurs, worth a month's wages, were still on his fancy boots. His bat-wing chaps, freshly stained with grease on the inner side of the legs, had not been removed, nor had his fancy neckerchief. His gun was still in its holster. His fallen Stetson had not been picked up.

De Witt himself searched the stiff cold body. He straightened up, his hands shaking, his face drawn and haggard. "The cash is missin'," he said in a low shocked voice. "The killer must ha' known he was carryin' it. For that dry-gulcher never gave the kid a chance."

"Never did," agreed McGillicuddy scarcely less shocked than the owner of the Slash T. But suddenly he flared out:

"Stop lookin' at me that way, De Witt. Stop it! I had no hand in this ugly thing, me nor my men neither. Why, doggone it, you've known me twenty years!"

"Somebody that knew the kid was totin' cash did this," De Witt retorted. "Who'd know besides a few of us at the Slash T, and you and your rannies. I can account for my men. McGillicuddy, it looks . . ."

"Button your lips, Martin," Dick Ahern cut in gruffly. "Men, the killer was a-wearin' hob-nailed shoes, 'bout number tens, when he waited here. He was still wearin' 'em when he swung up to Strickland's saddle and rode off down the swale. But I can't find where from he came."

"Can't find where from he came?" ejaculated McGillicuddy. "That ought to be dead easy. Them hob-nailed shoes'd leave plain tracks."

De Witt had glared at his old foreman. However, stifling whatever hot retort he had been about to make, he now snapped:

"Don't matter where the cur came from. We'll trail him to earth, since he was fool enough to ride Strickland's horse. Humph! Horse stealin' on top of robbery and murder. That buzzard'll swing high."

Dick Ahern resumed, "'Twould be powerful interestin' to know where from he came. But sure as crows fly, he wasn't wearin' them hob-nails when he landed here at this grove."

McGillicuddy was up in his saddle. "Let's go. The hoss tracks is plain.

But," he went on with an oath, "he's got three full days lead on us. Plenty hopeless."

The three grim riders had followed the hoofprints of Strickland's horse for about four miles when they came within sight of a cabin with smoke pouring from its chimney.

The log shanty lay in a valley near a tiny mountain stream, tributary to the Big Spider. Its occupant had put a fence around a small pasture in which Ahern saw two horses. A work team, he decided, noticing the collar marks on their necks.

"A homesteader lives here," McGillicuddy said. "I met up with him last fall. Maybe he saw that jigger."

"The tracks of Kid Strickland's hoss lead right on," Ahern pointed out, looking at those tracks very attentively. He wanted to make sure the rider had not swung off the horse leaving it to go onward riderless. There was no such indication.

"The killin' gent," he said, "wasn't closer'n two hundred yards of this shanty."

"Hello the house!" shouted De Witt.

A man appeared at the door, and the three cowmen rode over to the cabin. Ahern sized up an unkempt, unwashed and bewhiskered individual wearing a greasy shirt and even greasier overalls and—the old foreman's glance went swiftly to the man's feet—sturdy workshoes, small for such a large man, not over size eights.

McGillicuddy greeted the fellow as Lafe Holderness and introduced his companions. Holderness nodded and exclaimed as though delighted:

"Gets powerful lonesome 'round yere. I'd shore be tickled iffen you fellers'd light off an' breakfast with me.

"Ain't got time," said De Witt. "You see a rider pass here day afore yesterday? No, 'twas day before that. Some jasper on a trim bay saddle pony?"

Holderness looked straight at the rancher, his black eyes widening. "Matter with you, men? You act kinder excited. Why, ye-ah, I seen a rider pass. Three days ago, 'twere. I hollered to him but he jus' kept a-ridin'."

"What'd he look like?"

"Youngish feller, kinder heavy set, with a round, red face with maybe a couple, three days whisker stubble. This much I 'member plain, 'cause it struck me as kinder odd that he had him a cowpuncher's new saddle and a good hoss. He was awearin' big hob-nailed shoes. Couldn't hardly get his feet in the stirrups . . . What's haywire, Mr. McGillicuddy?"

"That skunk shot a kid in cold blood and stole ten thousand dollars off him," stated McGillicuddy. "He kept goin', huh?"

"Fer gosh sake!" gasped the unkempt Holderness. "A killer and thief, and I never suspected it! He jus' waved his hand at me and kept ridin', like I said. I hollered to him, 'Hey, there, if you're figgerin' on fordin' Big Spider it can't be did.'"

"He never answered you?" demanded De Witt.

"Nope. Likely he knowed what he was about. Plenty of other places for him to go without crossin' the river. . . . Can't you stop for breakfast, fellers? I don't see nobody fer weeks and months and . . ."

"We're ramblin'," De Witt snapped, and led the way back to the horse tracks. McGillicuddy and Dick Ahern followed.

The trail now followed down a valley, and quite soon the descent became much sharper, the little stream tumbling down a narrow gulch. Along this gulch ran a game trail which had been taken by the rider on Strickland's horse.

Suddenly the roar of Big Spider River burst on the cowmen's ears. Ahead of them lay a small open area where streams from both sides joined the main one. At the upper end of this tiny basin, Spider River emerged from a canyon and im-

mediately below it entered a gorge ripped out between sheer walls of rock.

When the riders had descended to the river's bank, the roar of angry water plunging over huge boulders in the gorge was deafening. Big Spider, swollen by melting snows, swirled and foamed. Certainly no man in his right senses would attempt to cross the ford above the gorge at this season.

Yelling to make his voice heard, McGillicuddy said:

"Ain't nobody ever been down through that Black Gorge yet. Folks what's explored it from the top say it's more'n seven miles long and gets worse all the way."

"Yet," boomed De Witt, "that darned killer rode into the river here."

Ahern was looking at the tracks. Yes, the rider had started across the boiling stream. Tracks led into the river and vanished. "He must have turned and come back out," thought the foreman.

But there was nothing to show that the man's horse had scrambled out of the boiling current on the same side of the river.

Gazing across the ford, Ahern was positive that no horse could have made the farther bank. Certainly no man could have done so. The turbulent current would have carried the most powerful swimmer away.

McGillicuddy was shouting, "It's a cinch he never got out on the other bank, De Witt."

"How we goin' to prove he didn't?" yelled the Slash T rancher. "We can't cross to see about it."

"And neither could that killer," said Dick Ahern.

"The blasted fool tried to do somethin' impossible," boomed McGillicuddy. "He's drowned and battered to a pulp, of course. So's his horse. And we'll never find the bodies or the cash neither."

De Witt stared at the other cowman. "You're right. Good enough for the cur, Saves us the trouble of catchin' him and swingin' him. Hate to lose the money, but it's lost. Hey, Dick, what's so interestin' about that little creek?"

"Nothin' much," said Dick Ahern, who had dismounted to examine the bed of the small stream, and had failed to find what he was looking for—a tell-tale track in the little stream itself. As he clambered up the bank and walked to his horse, both ranchers saw that the right leg of his overalls was ripped from hip to ankle.

De Witt jeered, "Now you're a pretty sight. How you goin' to get another pair of pants afore we go home?"

" 'Twas careless of me," muttered Ahern, grinning covertly behind one gnarled hand. He would not tell them that he had deliberately ripped his overalls.

Returning to Holderness's cabin, they found the homesteader out grubbing buck brush with a mattock.

"Back, huh?" he greeted them. "What'd you larn?"

De Witt told him briefly and profanely, concluding:

"He shore got his needings. Which'd satisfy me if I hadn't lost ten thousand bucks."

"Gosh!" ejaculated Holderness. "Who'd ever ha' thunk it? Thief tried for to cross Big Spider an' got drowned. What a darned fool! But good enough fer him, yep."

"Breakfast'll help a little," said De Witt sourly.

"Shore. We'll get some," agreed the homesteader. "This grubbin' out buck brush to make a ranch meadow is the toughest job I ever tackled. I've got a notion to throw 'er up, or sell the claim."

"You got an extra pair of overalls?" asked Dick Ahern. "I ain't hardly presentable the way I am."

Holderness squinted at him, then chuckled. "You sure are wrecked. Sorry, cowboy, but I cayn't help you none. These

yere is the onliest pair o' overalls I got. Got a needle and thread though."

Dick Ahern sewed up the leg of his overalls while De Witt and McGillicuddy helped get the breakfast ready.

"I wish this damned mystery was cleared up," De Witt burst out once. He looked at McGillicuddy and the man colored. "How'd that scoundrel know about the jack? Who was he?"

McGillicuddy said sharply: "You're goin' to make me mad soon, De Witt."

"I don't give a—"

Dick Ahern caught the old rancher by one shoulder and shoved him down in a crude homemade chair. "Don't say it, boss."

"I'll say what I darned please, Ahern. And don't you call me boss. I fired you. Now, doggone it . . ."

"So you did fire me," Ahern cut in, taking another stitch in his overall leg. "Such bein' the case, I'll have to start out on my own . . . Holderness, did you say you wanted to sell this claim?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Holderness. "You a buyer?"

"Wal, I might be."

"Blah! Don't be a fool, Ahern," shouted De Witt. "This ain't no place to raise cattle. Snow gets neck deep to a tall Indian. Winter lasts eight-nine months of the year up here, top of the range."

"Talkin' funny-like when you fired me, Martin. What you care what I do? Holderness, make the price right and I'll buy your claim. Got no money, though, till De Witt pays me my wages."

"I'll take two hundred dollars cash," Holderness stated. "Coffee's ready. Snowshoe rabbits is 'most done. Biscuits is ready. Set up, fellers . . . What you say, old cowboy?"

"I'll give you one fifty, Holderness, if you want to ride with us back to Scraggle to get the jack, after De Witt gets it from the bank and pays me."

"I'll do 'er," said Holderness.

"You're locoed, Dick Ahern," snorted De Witt. "Good thing I fired you if you're as crazy as all that."

"I think he's gone bughouse, too," agreed McGillicuddy. "Holderness has found out this country is some fierce in the winter, eh, Holderness?"

"You're both trying to knock the sale," Holderness returned.

Silence fell while the three hungry men ate the food provided. As is the custom on the range, the guests washed the dishes.

"I want things left ship-shape," said Dick Ahern. "You'll take only what you can carry on a saddle horse, Holderness?"

"That'll be a-plenty. I'll pack up a few things, 'course. You fellers want to catch my hosses up and saddle the gray one for me?"

De Witt, slightly puzzled, glanced at the man. This request was unusual. A man generally caught and saddled his own horse.

But Ahern said quickly, "Sure we will. Give me a hand, you two."

They went out and caught the team and saddled the gray with Holderness's old Texas kak, a saddle Ahern had glanced at before entering the cabin for breakfast. They led up their own mounts and put the bits in their mouths. De Witt glowered at old Dick Ahern and spoke again.

"Don't be such a darned fool as to buy this worthless snow bank, Dick. Heck! If you really want a homestead, why not take up one? There's good land down in the foothills and . . ."

"Ready," called Holderness, slouching out to join the three men. He now had a rifle in hand and belt buckled around his waist with holstered six-shooter attached.

Dick Ahern said, "You had ought to throw in that rifle, Holderness. Let's look at it."

"Not much I won't throw in this gun," Holderness handed the Winchester to the lean old foreman.

Ahern turned the rifle over in his hands,

appraising it. He worked the lever, throwing a shell out of the firing chamber and another from the magazine into the barrel. The gun was now cocked. He brought it up to his shoulder, suddenly swung it around and aimed straight at Holderness's heart.

"Hold steady, *killer!* Reach!"

The command snapped like a whiplash. To De Witt, McGillicuddy and Holderness it was more startling than a gun shot.

"He's gone plumb crazy, loco mad," gasped Holderness. "Get hold of him, you men." But his arms went up.

"Hold it!" snapped Dick Ahern. "Search him, Martin."

"Search him? Why?" yammered the thunder-struck De Witt.

"To get your ten thousand dollars!"

Holderness's eyes were suddenly those of a cornered wolf. Down swept his right hand. It smacked against the handle of his Colt and the weapon cleared leather.

Crack! The rifle had spoken. Holderness's Colt fell. He shrieked, jerking his hand upward, blood spurting from his fingers.

At last De Witt galvanized into action. From Holderness's hip pocket he drew a fat wallet, stepped back, opened it. Exposed were bills, lots of bills, tens, twenties, fifties, hundreds!

"Seems to prove what you just said, Ahern," shouted McGillicuddy, snapping out of his state of astounded bewilderment. "You called him 'killer'. How'd you know?"

"I ain't a killer," yammered Holderness. "This cash, it's mine."

"Yeah?" scoffed McGillicuddy. "Where're your hob-nailed shoes, Holderness?"

"They went down the Big Spider along with the poor horse that Holderness rode to the edge of the river, then shot dead," said Ahern quietly. "He waded up the little creek in his moccasins or with his feet wrapped in sacks, which he later burned, to reach his ranch."

"You can't know that," yelled Holderness and bit his tongue, realizing he had said too much.

"But I guessed it. There were some things I did no guessin' about a-tall," Dick Ahern resumed. "For instance, Kid Strickland greased his saddle, and the legs of his chaps where they rubbed against the saddle were greasy. Both of you look at Mister Holderness's overalls—only pair he's got. If he'd had 'nother pair, he'd likely ha' changed. Did you miss seeing something the first time we met this skunk?"

"Yeah," gasped McGillicuddy. "Yeah, I missed noticing how the inside of his overall legs are kinda oily. You—you saw that first off, Ahern? You remembered about the kid greasin' his saddle. Then why, why'd you delay so long afore you stuck up this reptile?"

"Yes, why?" asked De Witt, his eyes glowing. "Dick, I—uh—never meant it when I said you was fired."

"Huh, I knew you didn't, Martin. . . . Why'd I delay? Because I figgered Holderness'd have the swag cached and sit tight defyin' us. Likely we wouldn't find it either. I trapped him by offerin' to buy his worthless claim.

"Since he had no fear we suspected him, he'd take his wad along to Scraggle so he could drift from there. Leastwise I figgered so. Bandage up the jigger's hand, McGillicuddy, and then tie 'em both together. We'll be ridin'.

"One thing more, Holderness," he concluded. "You met Kid Strickland on the road when he was headin' to the Flag Bar and he told you too darned much for his own safety. Am I right?"

"Just as right about that as about the rest," and Holderness swore. "My scheme was perfect. But you, you old fox, didn't overlook a greased saddle, and I did!"

THE PAPER WAD

By O. A. ROBERTSON

Author of "Vest Pocket Evidence," etc.

A Kidnapping Plot of the Cow Country Is Solved by Trail-wise Men

CALL it accident, plain bull-headed luck, or blind superstition, the fact remains that Beverly Bushey's skeleton might now be chained to a twelve foot angle-iron in the bottom of a snake-infested pit if I hadn't ridden a hunch at the right time. Or rather a lucky horse. As it is, Beverly is safely back at home—and on fine terms with her old dad, something that wasn't quite true before.

But had not Beverly herself kept her head in about the worst crisis a woman could face the men who kidnapped her and left her to die a hideous death would never have been brought to justice. And this is the story.

Only two people besides Beverly herself and the kidnappers even knew she was missing until twenty-four hours after the ten thousand dollar ransom had been paid, and the kidnappers had broken their word about returning her. One was her father, who had paid the ransom; the other a leading citizen of the town named Stonewall Jackson Andrews, who had been named as intermediary by the kidnappers, and who had paid them the amount mentioned at the specified time.

The reason her husband, Bob Bushey, wasn't in the know was just this: Bob was just an ordinary cowhand who couldn't have raised ten thousand dollars in ten years. But her father, old John Simpson, is the wealthiest rancher in Alturas county, and the kidnappers put it straight up to old John to keep the whole transaction secret if he ever expected to see his only daughter again. Not until it became apparent that the abductors had broken their word did he break his.

Beverly's marriage to Bob Bushey had created a rift between her and her father, caused more by old John's kidding her about Bob's lack of finances, than because of any real objection he had to Bob personally. It's not really serious because they're all three right friendly when they meet. But the youngsters have got their backs up and are out to show the old man

that they can get along in the world without any help from him.

Bob keeps right on working for the outfit he's with, and Beverly moves into Prosperville and gets herself a job in the telephone exchange along with Bob's sister Margaret. Not having money enough to own a car, and being strictly a horseback girl anyway, she takes a saddle horse with her, so that on off days she can get out and around where she likes to be. She keeps her pony at an old shack of a stable over across the railroad tracks. The house that originally went with the stable has been burned down.

There's a creek and quite a tangle of brush along there, too, which is quite a place for the tramps to jungle up, but Beverly has been brought up not to be afraid of things like that. Besides, she's got them sized up right anyway. No one of them dare molest her because the others wouldn't stand for it.

IT'S early in September when this kidnapping is pulled off. Beverly is working the afternoon shift. She gets off duty at eight o'clock, and goes over to tend to her horse. It's while doing this that somebody grabs her.

The next morning Simpson gets a note demanding ten thousand dollars, and naming this retired lawyer, Andrews, as go-between. The note tells Andrews where to meet them with the money, and adds a caution that any treachery will mean Beverly's death. Andrews is a rip-snorting old cuss and there's no question of his honesty. He'll keep his word if it's given to the devil himself, so Simpson doesn't hesitate to trust him.

All this comes to me later. I'm working for him at the time, sort of ramrodding his cow outfit, and I reckon I'm as close to him as anybody. I notice that for several days he looks pretty sick, but he doesn't spill a thing until he becomes convinced that Beverly is not coming back. And then the news that she's been kidnapped breaks over the country like spontaneous combustion. Naturally, there's a general call for everybody to hunt for her.

At first it seems strange that she could have been gone so long without being missed, but the answer to that is simple enough. We at the ranch supposed she was still in town, while the folks in town figure that she's either at home or out with Bob.

The kidnappers have promised that she would be released within twelve hours after the payment of the money, but thirty-six hours have passed. It has rained hard the night old Andrews paid over the money, and it's possible the kidnappers are afraid to go back to where they've concealed the girl for fear they will be tracked. Or else, as seems more likely, they have never intended to keep their word. More people think she is dead than there is who think she may still be alive. But Simpson and Andrews have proof that she was alive two days before, because they had insisted upon having something in her own handwriting before they would turn over the money.

The note read: *"I am alive, but please hurry. Beverly."*

Somehow or other that note sounded pretty desperate. But there could be no doubt that it was Beverly's handwriting.

The whole country was combed over the first day by five hundred searchers until it looked like even a chipmunk couldn't have escaped notice. People in automobiles poked into every place where a car could possibly go, while a hundred and fifty horsemen combed the rough places. But it was no use.

Naturally me and Bob Bushey do our hunting on horseback, but we don't meet until after dark the first day of the search when we're both on our way to camp to change horses. Bob is like a crazy man. He's almost killed one horse that day, and he wants to start right out with another one, though it's too dark to see anything. It does seem like there's small chance of Beverly ever being found. Partly to quiet him I tell him that there's an old bay saddle horse in my cavvy called Shorty who is a lucky horse. That whenever I want to find

some critter that's lost I always ride Shorty, and eventually I find what I'm after. To my surprise Bob is impressed.

"You know," he says, "I've got the same kind of a horse, that old club-footed roan I call Clubby. But he's too slow for me to ride. God, man, I've got to cover territory. I've got to find Beverly."

"I'll ride Shorty anyway," I promises.

I've been kidded a lot about this stampeding old mustang of mine, and when it comes to a showdown I'm a heap nervous about stacking his peculiar talent up against a proposition of life and death. All I know for sure is that he always comes through, and I'm hoping mightily he'll do it just once more.

WE ARE on the trail at daybreak the next morning, but Bob soon leaves me. I encounter lots of other searchers, but there isn't as many out as yesterday. Most people believe that Beverly is either dead or buried, or has been spirited clear out of the country.

Hopeless thought it seems, I decide to scour the hills closest to town. Old Shorty is no long striker anyway. At that I cover a lot of miles and by sundown I'm still a

number of miles from home, and feeling mighty blue. Had Beverly been found I'd have seen the signals. It'll soon be getting dark, and I reluctantly admit to myself that old Shorty's luck has failed him.

I ride to the top of a hill and sweep the country with my field glasses in a desperate hope that I may locate some likely place to look during the few remaining minutes of daylight, but I don't see any. But sweeping the glasses up over the ridges I spot a rider outlined against the sky-line. I have a hunch it's Bob Bushey, though he's too far away to be sure. Anyway, I decide to alter my course and try to intercept him on his way back to town.

Somehow, that figure silhouetted against the sky-line seems the most tragic thing I've ever seen. It makes me feel more lonesome than I've ever felt in my life, and I know how Bob must feel. I wanted to say something to cheer him up, but when we did meet I was too choked up to say anything.

It was so dark by that time that we'd have missed each other if his horse hadn't nickered. I shouted and Bob answered me. It was plumb dark, but a new moon was just coming up over the ridges and beginning to make a little pale, yellow light. Both our horses are all in, and there's nothing to do except start for town by the nearest route.

That route takes us straight across an alkali flat right close to town that's as level as a floor. Nothing grows on it, so nobody ever goes out there, and if there's anything on it bigger than a rabbit it could be seen for miles away. Anybody hunting for anything would skirt the rough edges, but because we happen to meet plumb center of it we decide to cross rather than ride around.

Prosperville is almost surrounded by irrigated farms, but there's a long, narrow strip of desert reaches out toward this flat like a finger. It's too high and rough to be farmed. A mile or so out is a place called Neckersburg. It isn't a town at all, but a jumble of steep little juniper covered knolls where the young people from town like to go in the warm, summer evenings and park their cars. There's well beaten roads all through and around those knobs. We are headed for Neckersburg, and then to town.

For a while we just jog along without saying anything. The moon gets higher and makes some more light, but we're out

in the middle of the flat and there's nothing to see. We're both dead beat, and I'm beginning to doze in the saddle.

I rouse up once and look at Bob, but I glance on past him and notice a dark spot on the landscape off to our left and a little ahead. I ask Bob what it is.

HE COMES to with a start and looks where I'm pointing. "It's just a shadow," he says. Generally his eyes are keener than mine, but I've observed that much myself.

"I know it's a shadow," I tells him, "but what makes it?"

"The moon, I reckon," he says, and looks again. "Anyway, it ain't a person."

"The moon makes light," I argues. "Obstructions make shadows."

I turn toward that shadow and Bob follows me. There's nothing there, just a dark blot. There's not the sign of a raise. That flat stretches away as smooth and level as a table. But as we ride along that dark spot gets bigger. At first it's just a narrow streak, but it gets deeper, but not longer. We're right square onto it before we know what it is. It's a deep hole where the ground went out from under some time in the not far distant past, and what we've seen is the opposite rim thrown into shadow by the moon beyond.

When you gallop a horse across this flat it sounds hollow. Evidently some time during the winter, when the ground was wet this place has just let go and dropped. It's about twelve or fifteen feet deep, and forty across.

At that I guess neither of us realize that we've discovered something important till we're startled out of our wits by a shout.

"Hello!" comes a woman's voice from right in front of us.

I don't know whether either of us said anything as we tumbled off our horses, but probably we both yelled, for the next thing I knew Beverly was shouting instructions how to get down to her, and was calling Bob by name in a way that would make you weep. Pretty soon we commenced to make sense.

She was down in that hole. "There's a ladder that you can climb down," she calls out. "It's over to your left. No, the other way. To your left." As yet neither one of us knew right from left, nor straight up from sideways. But finally, with Beverly jabbering instructions we managed to find a ladder that didn't quite reach to the surface of the ground, and we scrambled down.

"Look out for rattlesnakes!" Beverly called. That stopped me where I was for a minute, but not Bob. That boy would have waded through rattlers knee-deep right then to have reached Beverly. It was dark down there and I didn't go stumbling around without lighting matches.

Bob had Beverly in his arms when I got there. She was as dirty as a four-year-old, and she was laughing, crying, and talking all at the same time. Seemed like all Bob could do was swear. I suddenly remembered that I was a third party, and I began to look around to see why the girl hadn't climbed out of her own accord. She's staked. And of all the hellish methods a crooked brain could think of this was the worst.

There's a twelve foot angle iron from some dismantled piece of farm machinery, one end of which has been chained and welded to an iron stake driven into the ground near one side of the pit. Beverly is fastened to the other end of it by a short piece of chain padlocked around her waist. It's long enough to enable her to stand upright without lifting the angle iron, but not long enough to enable her to reach the stake at the other end. By carrying her end of the iron she can move around in a half circle that's probably twenty-five feet across, but she has to stay right in that track. That is, by holding the iron waist high, and it's all she can lift, she can cover a radius of say eight by twenty-five feet, but she can't come within twenty feet of that ladder.

There's holes in both ends of that angle iron, and the chains are bolted on with the

nuts screwed clear down and the threads battered until they couldn't have been twisted loose with a stilson wrench. There simply was no way for us to get her loose, so I lined out for help while Bob tried to keep her from collapsing after the first excitement of being rescued was over.

ONCE I saw the headlights of an automobile at this Neckersburg, but it had gone before I got there, and on the other side I met a car loaded with young people. I tried to flag 'em, but they give me the razzberry. But I had recognized the car, so it wasn't any surprise. It belonged to a big-headed young smart-aleck named Harold Blackburn, the son of the town's one and only banker. Incidentally, he's a nephew of old man Andrews, the man who handled the ransom money, but he wouldn't have stopped to pick up his own grandmother if she's been lying beside the road. He was that kind.

By the time I got to town people were beginning to hit the hay. There was still a light in the sheriff's house. He had a nice lawn, so I turned my horse on it and went in. From there I called up the blacksmith, the doctor, and a couple of reporters who were there to get the news. In a few minutes they were all congregated, and we managed to get away in three cars without creating a stampede.

Bob and Beverly were just like I'd left 'em, only, of course, they'd quieted down. Bob even got away while the reporters took a couple of flashlight pictures. Beverly insisted that she didn't need any doctor's care, only a drink, so the blacksmith went right to work with his hack-saw. While she was being liberated she told her story.

She didn't know who her kidnappers were. The man who had grabbed her had wrapped his arms around her head so that she was both blind-folded and gagged. He had held her that way while the other fellow tied her feet together and her hands behind her back. Then they'd blindfolded and gagged her with strips of tape. She hadn't seen a thing until she was in the pit, and then it was dark. She'd only been able to make out that the men were masked and that they had their coats on wrong side out. At no time had the men spoken.

They had been back but once; that was to demand a note saying she was alive. She was only too glad to write it, and one of them had held a flashlight while she complied with their demand.

The worst feature of her experience had been the snakes. Fortunately, she had realized that if she gave way to her natural horror of them, she would have soon been reduced to a state of gibbering lunacy. She had kept them away by rattling her chain when they came too close, and it seemed that they had rattled back just as vigorously, but she had not been bitten. Sleep, however, had been well-nigh impossible.

The only food and water she had had was what had been there when she entered the pit. She had feared that a snake might fall into the water can so she had been obliged to keep the lid on, and finally it had become so foul that she could force herself to swallow even a mouthful only when literally compelled to by thirst.

Outside of these things, and the necessary force to bring her to the pit and chain her she had been actually mistreated but once. This was on the occasion of the kidnappers' one visit. Then she had frantically clung to one of them, pleading not to be left alone again with the snakes. The man had knocked her down, and the bruise still showed upon her jaw.

Though Beverly had showed wonderful stamina she was jittery when the excitement wore off, and she'd suffered enough from the exposure for the doctor to order her to bed; and for the next three days she wasn't allowed to talk to anybody but Bob, her father, and the doctor. Bob told me privately that she was under the influence of an opiate most of the time to keep her from having hideous nightmares in her sleep.

EVERYBODY supposed she'd told all she knew, and she had. But some of it she'd told to Bob before I got back with

help, and that secretive cuss had kept it under his hat, except to confide in just one person, at it turned out later. That was the town marshal, an old time friend of the Simpson family. A man named Dave Giles.

There seemed to be no clues. All the paraphernalia had been arranged before her arrival in the pit. That fact, together with the care they had taken not to disclose their identity to Beverly indicated that the kidnappers must have intended to release her after they got the money. Undoubtedly the storm, which would have obliged them to leave tracks, had made them afraid to return and they had left Beverly to die. It began to look like the criminals had made a clean getaway, and might have continued to look that way had not old man Andrews, who had delivered the money to the abductors, played another hunch.

As attorney for the leading citizens of the town, Andrews, as I remarked before, was a regular red-baiter, and even Prosperville had its quota of reds during the depression. But that doesn't do the subject justice. With Andrews, anybody who spoke even mildly disrespectfully of existing institutions was fit to be hanged. His particular aversion was a young red by the name of Johnny Grantham who lived with his wife and four kids in a dilapidated old shack down toward the jungles. Though he had been on relief more than a year Grantham was the ring-tailed, snorting leader of every mass meeting and protest staged by the unemployed. He didn't care who he insulted, God, man, or the devil, just so he could make it include old man Andrews and the latter's brother-in-law, J. Landon Blackburn, the town's leading business man.

Andrews expresses a belief that the man he'd given the money to, though he hadn't seen him clearly, might well be Grantham. Anyway, he persuades the sheriff to swoop down on Grantham's place without notice and make a search. That search revealed plenty.

The first thing the posse noticed was that Grantham had a pile of dry lodge-pole pines for firewood. The rails of that short ladder in the pit had been made of lodge poles. And everybody else in the country burned dry quaking aspens because they were much better fuel, and the aspens were much closer to town. But Grantham had borrowed a team and wagon from a rancher who lived far out to get his wood, and having no place to keep a team he'd had to live with the rancher while he got the wood. And lodge-poles were much easier to get from there than aspens.

When the slats of the ladder had been knocked off and reconstructed it was found that they duplicated a missing collar beam in an old smoke house where Grantham lived. When the posse got to rummaging around in that old smoke house they discovered an old portable typewriter that was free from the dust that covered everything else. And when the ransom note was copied on its rickety old keys every letter and blur corresponded exactly.

BUT perhaps the most damning evidence of all was the finding of Beverly's purse inside Grantham's house. She had had it when seized by the kidnappers, but she had never seen it again. There had been thirty or forty dollars in it, but now the money was gone. And Grantham's wife had recently spent enough money to make the merchants take notice, considering her habitual impoverished state.

Grantham readily admitted that he had found the purse in the road close to his house. Notoriously loud-mouthed and lippy he had launched into a defense of his action in spending the money. He contended that anyone with a spark of manhood, whose wife and children were practically barefooted, would have done the same thing. He had finished with a tirade about Beverly being a rich man's daughter, and yet she was deliberately and needlessly depriving some working girl of a job.

But his peculiar brand of ethics didn't get over. There was plenty of evidence to remove practically all doubt as to his guilt, and lynching talk was plumb rampant.

Grantham's closest friend was a single man named Jack Silvers. Both of them were arrested, and though they both loudly denied their guilt it was just a question whether they'd be hung by a mob before they could be sentenced to the penitentiary.

It was Bob Bushey who did more to stop the lynching talk than anybody else, by pleading that the men be given a chance to defend themselves. I was glad of that, because somehow Grantham didn't have the bearing of a man who could be as brutally cruel as the kidnappers had been. But on the other hand I couldn't conceive of anyone else being that way either.

There was some question about where they could have got an automobile, but it was generally agreed that men like them could readily steal a car. And presently that question was solved. This young Harold Blackburn that I've mentioned now remembered that his car had been stolen the very night of the kidnapping. According to him and his pal, Oliver Lyle, they had left the car standing in front of Lyle's house while they were inside eating supper and playing cards. Lyle lived with his mother, a widow, and her house could be seen from Grantham's shack.

The boys hadn't missed the car for several hours. They had walked back to Blackburn's house to report the theft, but discovered the car in a back street. Believing it to have been but a prank of someone they hadn't mentioned it. They were encouraged to keep silence by the fact that whoever had borrowed the car had evidently had the misfortune to run over a skunk and the odor had been terrible.

No sooner was this known than Bob Bushey came forward with certain evidence that he had hitherto suppressed.

"If that was the car used by the kidnappers," he said, "it should be easy to prove it. As a matter of fact it's already practically proved because Beverly says that the kidnappers did run over a skunk on the narrow bridge beyond Neckersburg, and the fumes almost overpowered her. But there ought to be more proof than that.

"While Beverly was in that car with her hands tied behind her, she managed to slip her wedding ring off her finger and push it far down behind the cushion of the back seat. If that ring is there there can be no doubt of the car."

The ring was found. Now the only fear was that Grantham and Silvers would have their unemployed friends swear to a fake alibi, but that fear was soon dispelled. Both men claimed that they had been down in the jungles talking to some hobos there, but every hobo had evaporated from the vicinity as soon as it was known that there had been a kidnapping. There was only their unsupported word.

THE only reason the men were not given an immediate hearing was because Beverly was not able to appear. That was a bit strange, because she wasn't the kind of girl to be put to bed for two weeks even by such a harrowing experience. Yet she kept to her room and the only comment that came from her was that she was not certain of the prisoners' guilt. Her doubt, Bob confided privately to me, was that she thought Grantham was much smaller than either of the kidnappers. But in view of the excitement and fear she must have been under that didn't seem to be a very strong point to me.

And then, some two weeks after Beverly's return, she announced that she was ready to take the witness stand, and a preliminary hearing of the prisoners was ordered. All material witnesses, including myself, were

present. There was also another witness whom it seemed to me must be immaterial. He was a stooped little Jew by the name of Libnitz.

Grantham was still defiant and sullen by turns, while Silvers was frankly frightened. Neither was represented by counsel, and Grantham told the judge that they were willing to waive the hearing and be bound over to the district court if his honor would appoint counsel for them.

"The request can be granted," the judge said. "It is the duty of this court to appoint counsel for the defendants if they are not represented by counsel of their own."

Then, to my surprise, Bob Bushey got up and faced the judge. Being only an ordinary cowhand, or at least a cowhand, he wasn't much used to talking in public, and his face was pretty white.

"Your honor," he said, "I don't care what you do about these two prisoners, but I wish you'd let my wife and one or two other witnesses take the stand right now. I believe this whole thing can be cleared up."

"I'm afraid that would be extra legal, but there can be no objection to Mrs. Bushey

telling her story publicly if that is what she wishes," the judge said.

The prisoners looked uneasy, but more curious. I guess they figured they were in deep enough anyway that it didn't matter. I noticed that Marshal Giles was close to Bob and Beverly and old man Simpson, and somehow I seemed to know that they had still been holding something back. That courtroom became so silent you could have heard a pin drop as Beverly took the witness chair. Because it wasn't a hearing she didn't have to be sworn, but she asked to be.

"Beverly," Bob said, "while you were in that pit out yonder did anybody bring you food or water?"

"No," she answered, "the only food and water I had was already there. The water was in a five gallon milk can, the food in a wooden box."

She went right ahead and told the story just as everybody knew it, down to the time the two men visited her in the pit with their demand that she write a note to her father saying she was alive. But she did add a few little details that nobody had thought much about before, such as what she had had to eat. She had had, she said, two loaves of bread, some cold meat, a hunk of cheese, some oranges and apples, a package of raisins, and a bag of peanuts.

She stopped there and Bob stepped forward and held up a brown paper sack with a hole in it.

"Beverly," he said, "did you ever see this piece of paper before?"

"Yes," she replied, "it's part of the paper bag that contained the peanuts the men left for me."

"Is it the only thing you and I brought from the pit the night you were rescued?"

"The only thing."

"Did it have this hole torn out of the side just like it has now?"

"Exactly as now, except that I later wrote my name on it for purposes of identification. Also a notation of figures."

"Did you have a pencil with you in the pit?"

"No."

"Did you copy the figures from something?"

"Yes, I copied them from memory. The original figures were on the piece of paper that has been torn from this sack. The figures were ten, thirty-five, twenty, fifteen, and five, and they had been added up and the total, eighty-five placed under the line at the bottom. I think some clerk must have added up a bill on that sack."

"Who tore that piece of paper out?"

"I did."

"What did you do with it?"

I GLANCED over at the prisoners, and I've never seen such a look of intense interest on anybody's face in my life as I saw then. Neither one of them seemed to breathe.

"I folded the paper into as compact a wad as I could and thrust it into the pocket of one of the kidnappers," Beverly said.

I glanced at Grantham again, and I saw the sweat suddenly burst out on his skin. He'd started to breathe again.

"When was that?" Bob went on gently.

"The night they came to have me write a note to my father. They were masked, and they had their coats on inside out as they had had the first night. I had hoped I'd get a chance to plant some evidence on them to be used in case I ever got out, so I suddenly pretended to become hysterical, and catching hold of one man's coat I pleaded with him not to leave me alone there with the snakes. As his coat was on wrong side out I managed to drop that paper wad into the inside pocket. It was so very small I hoped it would not be noticed. Then he hit me on the jaw and when I came to they were gone."

"Beverly," Bob asked soberly, "have you ever seen that piece of paper since?"

You could have fired a gun in that courtroom right then and it wouldn't have been noticed.

"I have," Beverly said calmly. "I saw it just before I came to this courtroom."

"Who had it?" Bob snapped.

"Marshal Giles," the girl said, and you could hear a sigh of disappointment from half the people in the house.

"Is this it?" Bob asked, and Giles handed him a small piece of paper.

Beverly examined it closely. "It is. If you'll fit it in the hole in the sack you'll see that the edges go together."

The judge himself took the two pieces and put them together. They fitted perfectly.

"Mrs. Bushey," the judge said, "are you aware that what you are now saying may be the means of sending somebody to the penitentiary for life?"

"I am," Beverly said, and left the stand.

Marshal Giles was next sworn.

"When did you first see this paper?" Bob asked him.

"I saw the sack the next day after Beverly was found. You gave it to me and explained that it might be very important as evidence. I filed it away. I didn't see the other piece until this morning."

"How did you come to see it then?"

"A cleaner and dyer by the name of Isadore Libnitz brought it to me. I had made a round of all the cleaners in the city along with you, and asked each man to keep a lookout for such a piece of paper and warned them to say nothing about it, but to bring it to me."

"You are sure that this small piece of paper is the one Libnitz brought?"

"Absolutely."

THE judge himself broke in to order Libnitz to take the stand. But before the old Jew could be sworn two men started to leave the courtroom. But Giles blocked their path with a gun in his hand, and Bob Bushey was right behind him.

"No, you don't," Giles warned them. "Sit down and wait."

The men dropped nervously into their chairs.

"Mr. Libnitz," the judge asked, "did you get this piece of paper out of the pocket of a coat somebody sent you to be cleaned?"

Libnitz spread his hands and shrugged. "Mr. Giles, he tells it to watch for this paper. This morning I find it."

"In whose coat?" the judge barked.

"The coat belongs to Harold Blackburn. I have cleaned it many times."

"You are sure this is the paper?" Bob asked.

"Of course. Mr. Giles tells me to write my initials on the back from these figures the minute I find it. There are my initials, I. L."

"That's all I wanted to have known, your

honor," Bob said. "It's enough to show that Grantham and Silvers are innocent, and that Blackburn and Lyle are guilty. They not only kidnapped my wife, but they tried to frame up innocent men to cover up their own guilt. I've got just one more request to make, your honor."

"And what is that?" the judge asked.

"Lock me in a room alone with either one of these birds for twenty minutes, and I'll guarantee to come out with a confession," Bob said grimly.

"I hardly think that 'll be necessary," the judge said. "From a look at their faces I hardly think either one of them will deny it right now."

And the judge was right. It turned out that J. Landon Blackburn was slipping badly financially, and he had cut down his son's allowance to practically nothing. Lyle never had had any money, so they had planned the abduction.

Me, I'm still ramrodding the outfit, but now I work for Simpson & Bushey.

Adventurers All

THE MAIL MUST GO THROUGH

BACK in 1906 there was no regular mail service between Idaho City and the tiny mountain settlement of Lowman, which lies on the north bank of the South Fork of the Payette River, approximately thirty miles to the northeast.

That is how, on a day in January, I happened to be carrying some twenty pounds of mail in my pack. There were also two dozen steel traps, a lunch, and three bottles of whiskey ordered by different settlers on the river. Weighed on the scales at the old Luna Hotel—since destroyed by fire—in Idaho City, my pack, with a light axe which I had just bought, strapped to it weighed just sixty pounds.

As for clothing, I wore a heavy woolen Mackinaw coat and trousers, and on my feet heavy woolen "German" socks and Arctic rubbers. I had not brought my snowshoes with me when I had left the river, for the snow fall, up to that time, had been unusually light.

It was snowing heavily when I left Idaho City on the return trip, but with the confidence of youth in my strength, I had refused the loan of a pair of snowshoes, though several old-timers warned me that the snow would be waist deep on the six

thousand foot summit which lay between the two settlements.

Before I had covered five miles the storm had increased in violence until it was snowing at the rate of an inch an hour! I was young and strong, and hardened to mountain climbing, but eight hours traveling found me only fifteen miles from town. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and growing dark. A terrific blizzard was sweeping the mountains, and the snow was already half way up my thighs. And I still had that six thousand foot summit to cross.

Five miles up the road was the Kempner Ranch, where I could have stayed overnight, and borrowed snowshoes. But I had had trouble there at one time, and fear that I might be robbed of the three bottles of whiskey caused me to take the Beaver Creek cut-off, and try to push through.

In summer the cut-off is a narrow but perfectly plain trail through the forest, but in winter—well, there isn't any trail.

By that time, my pack seemed to weigh hundreds of pounds. Pains of weariness were shooting up my legs, I was soaked through with perspiration, my heart was hammering against my ribs, and a growing weakness warned me that I was all in.

I found a stump, rested my pack on it and considered my plight. Suddenly I realized that I was falling asleep on my feet.

Summoning all my will power, I jerked myself awake, knowing that sleep meant death. In imagination, I saw myself lying dead in the snow, with my pack still on my shoulders; the pack that contained United States Mail. With the thought came another, born perhaps of something I had read or heard somebody say.

"The mail *must* go through!"

I shucked my pack, and with my axe attacked a small dry pine, intending to cut wood for a fire. I struck one lick, and the axe handle broke off close up to the steel. The axe hurtled off into the snow and darkness. The steel wedge used to tighten the axe on its handle had been driven in too far, and had splintered the wood.

Angered, but undismayed, I broke dry pine twigs from the lower branches of a tree, piled them against the butt, and then looked for matches. Not one could I find, neither in my pockets nor in my pack. Confident that I could make the return trip in one day, I had ignored or forgotten the mountaineer's most important law of self preservation. Never be without the means of lighting a fire.

After that, I managed to slip again into my pack straps, and grimly I floundered through the darkness and the snow. Sometimes I'd only cover a hundred yards or so before falling down. Almost I'd drop asleep, but somehow I managed to rise again and again, for always hammering at my brain was the thought: the mail *must* go through!

At times, during that terrible night, I imagined I had taken an oath to take the mail through at all costs; at other times I saw myself in prison for having deserted the mail. And so, grimly, I fought my way through the darkness and the storm, steering a course by instinct, but knowing that if I lived to keep on climbing, I must eventually reach the summit.

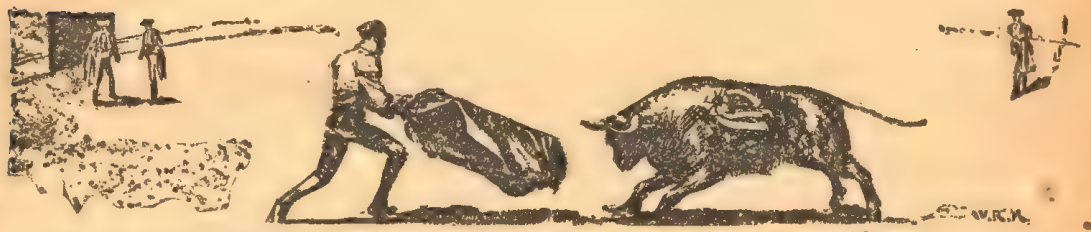
I reached the summit shortly after sunrise. The storm had ceased, and the weather had turned bitterly cold. Six thousand feet below me I could see the south fork of the Payette River, and the roadhouse standing beside it.

When I reached the roadhouse, the postmaster's mother, Grandma Lowman, eighty-two years of age, found my rubbers full of ice, and my socks were frozen to my feet. While the old lady told me in no uncertain terms what kind of a fool I had been not to "ditch that heavy pack," she was cutting away my rubbers. Then she brought a pan, and into it poured the contents of the three bottles of whiskey I had brought from Idaho City.

"Soak your derned toes in that, son," she ordered. "Ain't nobody on the River goin' to get drunk if Grandma Lowman can help it. Anyway, thar ain't nothing so good as likker to take out frost!"

If you would know the meaning of pain, try having frozen feet thawed out in raw whiskey. If you would know monotony, try lying seven weeks on a couch in a snow-bound mountain roadhouse, with your feet wrapped in bear-greased bandages, while you read a dozen varieties of mail-order catalogues which you carried thirty miles through a mountain blizzard because "the mail *must* go through."

Reginald C. Barker.



MY INVOLUNTARY EXPERIENCE AS A MATADOR

FOR my two weeks holidays last summer I planned a trip to Hearst in northern Ontario. The holidays duly came along, so I strapped my old dunnage bag to the carrier of my motor cycle and set off.

Everything went as planned the first day, and night found me several hundred miles on my way, in the town of Haileybury. Next morning bright and early I again hit the road. The unending rocks had given way to timber and farming country, and I was now in what is commonly known as the Clay Belt, Ontario's most northern farming country.

Suddenly as I rounded a curve I came face to face with the inevitable detour sign. A man with a red flag stood beside it to turn all traffic down a temporary side road. He informed me that the detour was about six miles long, while the piece of road under construction was a little more than two.

After chatting for a minute he became quite friendly and told me that he believed I could get through the main road. Some grading had been done and a culvert had been removed, but the workmen would put a plank across the opening so that I could ride my machine across. Rather than ride over six miles of detour little better than the main road I decided to take the man's advice.

By taking things easy I covered the first mile without any trouble. Then about half a mile ahead I noticed a gang of men at work around the culvert. They had graded up the road on both sides and the surface became rougher and rougher. When I got within about three hundred yards of the culvert, I overtook two farmers leading a huge red bull, with a set of fierce looking horns. One man walked ahead holding a stick attached to a ring in the bull's nose, while the other came behind holding a rope fastened to the animal's front leg.

Suddenly as I passed him the bull gave his head a furious wrench and broke the stick like a pipe stem. What happened to the rope I never had time to see, for the brute lowered his head and charged after me like an express train. On a good road this would have been fun, but bumping over pot holes and rocks in low gear with an open culvert ahead gave the bull everything his

own way. It was impossible to get off either side of the road, as the shoulders had been graded up almost straight and the deep ditches were full of mud and water.

As I approached the culvert with the bull still only a few feet behind, the road gang stopped work to watch the show but apparently never thought of putting down a plank. When I got within fifty or sixty feet of the culvert the old road-bed showed up again comparatively smooth and led up fairly steeply to the edge of the hole, from which men were now scattering in all directions.

My front wheel struck the smooth road and a wild plan entered my head. I had read of motor cycle broad jumps but had never seen one performed. Twisting the throttle wide open I charged up the incline. The big machine hit a bump at the edge of the culvert and rose like a hurdle jumper, landing with a sickening wobble in the pile of dirt on the opposite side of the five foot excavation. After regaining control and glancing over my shoulder, I stopped on the smooth surface beyond, just in time to see my pursuer emerge from the side of the culvert into which he had tumbled. He was the picture of dejection with one horn broken off and his magnificent red coat covered with slime. Before he could make up his mind on further conquest his owner came up and dropped the rope over his head, snubbing him up short to the nearest telephone pole.

I went on to finish my comparatively unexciting trip, but since that time I have wakened from nightmares where huge red bulls pursued me across endless chasms, and I always give the living ones a wide berth.

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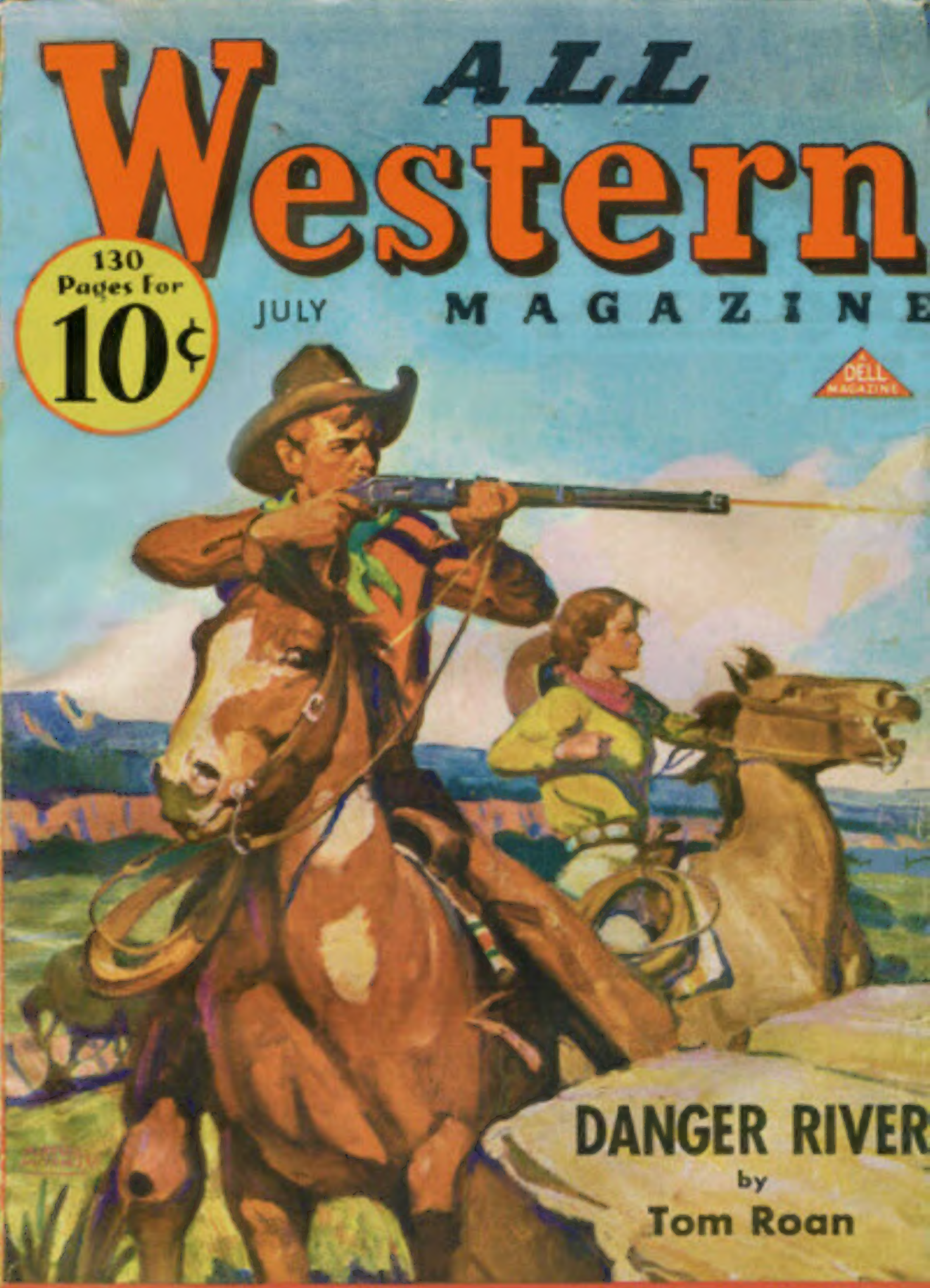

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